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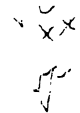
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# A GENDER IN SATIN

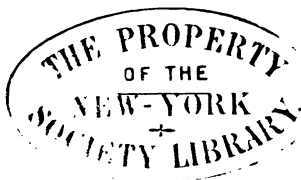
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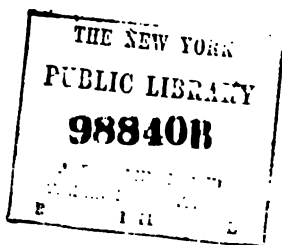
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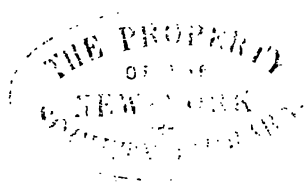
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A GENDER IN SATIN





## A GENDER IN SATIN.

### CHAPTER I.

“SHE is incomprehensible,” he said.

“That,” observed the friend, “only means she is a woman.”

Smoke wreaths and silence followed this observation. It was too trite and commonplace for other notice—in a club-room. But the train of thought was followed by a brain unremarkable as yet for anything in life except artistic abilities and good-nature.

“I think she is n’t—an ordinary woman,” at last said the first speaker. “She is so—so different, you know.”



"I don't *know*. I have never had the pleasure of seeing her. But the remark shows that your view of feminine nature is prejudiced."

"By what?"

"By a weakness for one special form of it. In short, you are in love, Chris. I have observed the symptoms for some considerable time. You may not know it, but you are."

Christopher Hope looked thoughtfully into space as represented by a vista of newspapers, lounges, and tobacco smoke, a few bald heads, and several sleek ones. The Liberty Club was Bohemian in its tendencies.

His gaze lost its abstraction, and travelled slowly back till it rested in frank, unabashed questioning on his companion's face.

"I wonder," he said, "if I am?"

"Shall I diagnose your symptoms?" asked Grantley Dering.

He was a rising young physician,



with wide ambitions and a limited income. He also was—or desired to be considered—a cynic, of the world, worldly, and to whom women were only a sex that meant stepping-stones to fame. His friend and present companion was an artist—the “chum” of past school and college days. To him dreams presented the sum-total of life. He had never been roused into active energy, or obliged to face any critical dilemma. He had boundless enthusiasms and intense belief in the goodness of humanity. His was the nature that generally comes to grief among the breakers of Life. Dering’s, on the other hand, was the one that surmounts them.

After that last question Christopher Hope lit a fresh cigarette, and then looked meditatively at his friend.

“I have n’t any—that I know of,” he answered.

“No patient has until the phy-

sician has pointed them out to him. It is surprising how an assertion assists a discovery. Let me see now. You eat well?"

"Yes."

"Drink. . . um—I need n't ask that. . . . Sleep—walk—work as—well as you used to do—a year ago?"

"Certainly. But I've a beastly bad memory, Grantley, and I can't exactly remember how I performed all these functions—a year ago."

"But you find no falling off at present?"

"None."

"You have n't touched brush or pencil, Chris, for over a month."

"True. I'm meditating on a new subject—and working—elsewhere." He sighed. "I wish," he said suddenly, "I had't red hair, or such an idiotic name——"

"Ah," said his friend quickly. "She has been laughing at you."

"She . . . Oh, I see," he smiled somewhat foolishly—"you think

you've caught me now. You're quite wrong. I've never heard her laugh. She takes life much too seriously, I fancy."

"Old? . . . Soured—a disappointment?"

"Old—not twenty, I'd bet. A beautiful, serious face, full of noble thoughts and pure ambitions. She only cares for art. I don't wonder. No man is fit to touch the hem of her gown——"

"Poor Chris! You are hard hit. Could n't you travel—go abroad—do something else besides haunt a studio and dream of an impossible picture? Love is only an ailment, like any other form of disease. It can be treated and cured—if taken in time. The only difference is that its victims prefer to suffer—as a rule."

"I don't suffer," remarked Christopher placidly.

"You do, but you won't acknowledge it. If you had followed my profession, now——"

"I should n't have any powers of idealisation left. To you women are only subjects. You dissect their beauty as ruthlessly as you used to dissect limbs and arteries in your student days. To you a face is only the mask of a brain ; a body only the vehicle of possible or inherent disease ; and a beautiful woman——"

"Merely a gender in satin. There's a definition for you. You're quite right. My heart is as hard as my head, and I mean to keep it so. Science is a severe mistress, and will brook no rival, and science will rule the world longer than art, Chris—take my word for it."

"I've taken your word for a good many things, Grantley."

"But you are a dreamer still. You look at Life through smoked glasses, as if it were an eclipse of the sun. Its light, boldness, terror, glory, are all obscured to you,

partly by temperament, partly by  
—fear——”

“Fear?”

The dreamy eyes flashed with sudden fire. The whole face altered, and grew alert and self-defensive.

“Oh, I don’t mean in the sense of cowardice, but simply that you are so afraid of finding reality widely different from imagination, that you shrink from applying any test.”

Christopher looked at his long-extinct cigarette.

“What could I do?” he asked helplessly.

“It is n’t what you *could* do, but what you choose to do. If you see any good in making yourself miserable, in neglecting your profession, and wasting your time, well, you must continue to perform these duties as punctiliously as you have of late performed them. On the other hand——”

"Yes?" queried Christopher gently, "that is more to the point. On the other hand?"

"Cut," said his friend shortly. "Fly—turn tail—leave her! She can do you no possible good; she may do you an immense amount of harm. After all, what does it amount to?"

"Nothing—at present," said Christopher, with a sigh.

"Be thankful for that. Love is folly—and you can't afford marriage. Don't drift into the one, or you'll end by repenting the other. An artist should never marry. He ruins his career, impairs his nerves, and offers a hostage to unpopularity. The female soul, once held in bondage by the marriage ring, only sees in art a rival, and in models—impropriety."

There was another pause. It was a distinguishing mark of any continued conversation between the two friends. They perfectly understood one another.

"It is a pity," said Christopher at last, "that Love, to be respectable, must end in marriage. Poor Love! I suppose the frock-coats, and satin gowns, and rice, and slippers, terrify him. If he leads his victims to the church door, he rarely follows them out of it."

"We ought to manage women better than we do," remarked Der-ing. "We seem to have only employed two methods—coercion or deception. But it's hard to make out what they want."

"Still," said Christopher, "it's wonderful that they should care for us at all. They give up so much, suffer so much——"

"And worry so much," concluded Grantley. "I know *that* from experience of unhappy husbands. Few men have the brain-power to resist the perpetual nagging, discontent, and foolishness of wives. They are bound to deceive them in self-defence."

"At present," observed Chris,



"there is no question of marriage, or—or the inducements."

"Then take my advice, and don't dream of the possibility of either. Ten, fifteen, or even twenty years, would be time enough to hamper Art with private responsibilities."

Christopher Hope gave himself up to a calculation of the relative advantages of art and age, and only found himself drifting into speculations as to why brown eyes were so magnetic, and why a lovely glint of sunlight in a certain studio always contrived to lose itself in a massive coil of chestnut hair. He wished that Life were not so peremptory in its interference with Dreams. It was so pleasant just to drift along and take what came to one, instead of questioning and arguing as to Danger *versus* Desirability.

He was essentially a dreamer. The true artist generally is. His environment rarely conduces to the imaginative, but that does not

prevent the Imaginative ruling his soul.

When the World is older and wiser it will grant independent incomes to Genius, so that it may do justice to itself and its age without the hampering drawback of earning bread and cheese, not to mention other insignificant but desirable items of nutriment. Christopher Hope was so far fortunate that he was not absolutely dependent on his art for subsistence. A maiden aunt, with whom he was a great favourite, had chosen to play fairy godmother to his career early in life. He had caused her intense disappointment by declining to verify the proverb as to "bending twig and inclining tree." In other words, she had educated and destined him for the Church, and he had entirely refused to take orders, despite an expensive and blameless college career, and the prospect of a snug living which was at the good lady's disposal.

Brush and pencil usurped the place of the Thirty-nine Articles, and art schools displayed allurements before which a gorse-surrounded rectory and a congregation of bovine intelligence paled like dying fires.

A temperament combined of gentleness and laziness suddenly proved itself strong to obstinacy on one special point, and Lady Tabitha Mull had to forego her cherished plans and resign her nephew to the dangerous purlieus of Bohemia, and the attractions of plaster casts and models.

The Scotch blood ran cold in her veins when she pictured her idolised nephew surrounded by snares and temptations of this nature, and not even the success of his first exhibited picture quite reconciled her to the methods of its production.

He had spent some considerable time in Paris and Italy, finally had established himself in London in

a studio of his own, and there worked fitfully or enthusiastically as the fancy took him.

Lady Tabitha rarely came to London. She was as fond of grey skies, mists, and cold winds as a certain great and gracious personage for whom the Highlands of Scotland possess unaccountable attractions.

Christopher hated the great, dreary castle, with its bleak aspect, its vast rooms, its old-fashioned retainers, and its hereditary dulness. Duty compelled him to put in an occasional autumn or summer at this half-barbaric fortress, but inclination never prompted him to linger a day longer than was absolutely necessary. Telegrams invariably recalled him to work at the end of three weeks.

Grantley Dering had never been to Drumlochrie Castle yet, despite many invitations. He was always too busy to take a holiday at such a distance. He had formed an

ideal of Lady Tabitha which was less prepossessing than correct, and had never summoned up courage to test its reality. Few ideals stand the process, so perhaps he was wise.

After ten minutes of silence Christopher resumed the conversation.

"My aunt," he said, "has asked you again to the castle. You *must* come. You can't possibly invent another form of saying 'Decline with thanks.' I fancy the old lady wants to know what sort of friends I possess, and has selected you as a sample. Relations are so curious."

Grantley lifted his head and looked keenly at the ugly face and big frame beside him.

"When do you go?" he asked.

"I'm not good at dates," answered Christopher. "The autumn is a comprehensive phrase, and this is August."

"I've a great mind to come with you this time. You want looking

after. Does the old lady ever get ill?"

"Never," said Christopher, emphatically. "You could n't keep your hand in with experiments on her, so don't build up hopes. A blue pill and a black draught twice a year is her only form of medicine. She rises at six, goes to bed at ten, and is out in all sorts and conditions of weather."

"One of the old school, in fact. Should we hit it off, do you think?"

"There is time to draw back. We might go to Paris instead," observed Christopher, irrelevantly.

"Paris!—in August? Good Heavens! No."

"Or I might persuade her to ask some girls. She is rather fond of girls."

"What sort of girls?—red-haired, raw-boned Scotch lassies, with an accent that sets one's teeth on edge, and feet——"

He shuddered dramatically.

"I've been in Edinburgh, you know," he added. "I think two square feet went to the yard *there*."

Christopher laughed. "That's not quite my aunt's sort of girl," he said. "They are sometimes pretty, and always agreeable."

"To you—as heir presumptive perhaps. The future owner of Castle Drumlochrie——"

Christopher interrupted him. "That is not at all certain," he said. "She has never mentioned it to me."

"People don't always mention things, even when they have made up their minds about them."

Christopher looked reflective. "It would mean a great deal," he said presently. "One would feel more—more—settled."

"That," said Grantley, abruptly, "decides my view of your case. I should like to see the girl."

The ugly ingenuous face flushed up to the roots of its fiery hair.

The dreamy blue eyes drooped like a shy child's.

"Very well," he said. "Come round to the studio next Monday. It is the last model day. She is sure to be there. You'll see if I'm not right. She *is* different to other girls."

"Another symptom, Chris. You're in a bad way. I doubt if even flight would cure you now. Come, let us leave this place. The smoke is stifling."



## CHAPTER II.

“ I DON’T know why you do it,” said Mrs. Leslie Bruce, turning over a heap of notes in a disconcerted fashion.

“ Do what ? ” asked a grave voice—a beautiful voice that matched a face equally beautiful, yet far too serious for its years.

“ What ? As if you did n’t know. Work — slave — sacrifice yourself for what you call—art ! It ’s ridiculous. You ought to be dancing, laughing, riding, boating, enjoying life like other girls, and yet——”

“ How do you know I don’t enjoy life ? There are different methods. Because mine does n’t appeal to you——”

“ Appeal—to me. I should think not indeed.”

"Is no reason," continued the girl who had been accused of sacrificing vanity at the shrine of Art, "that it should not content me utterly and entirely."

"Of course, I know you are impossible. I never met such a woman. You've no weaknesses, or—or——"

"Do go on. It's rather pleasant to know what other women have."

"Lovers, for one thing, Paula, which you 'll never have."

"Or a lover? I think *one* goes a long way, you know—if he is a good one."

"I don't see how you can expect even one. You snub men so."

"Do I? I did n't know. They are so uninteresting as a rule."

"Have n't you found the exception?"

"Frankly, no. I have n't time to think about him."

"Paula, you are laying up a

terrible old age for yourself. You surely don't *want* to be an old maid?"

"Well," said the girl, demurely, "you see, I have so many married friends."

"That is unkind," said Mrs. Leslie. She had a charming *vox humana* stop in her expressive voice. She used it now, and Paula Drewe felt as if she had been guilty of cruelty in some shape or form.

Little Mrs. Leslie had not been fortunate in her married life. Some of her friends said it was because she flirted so much. Her own explanation was that she had been "misunderstood." It is a comprehensive explanation and evades particulars. Marriage is a subject that eludes any given rule. Its demands are infinite, and its supplies, generally considered, are limited. Mr. Leslie Bruce was not a patient man. He found it convenient to have important business transactions with foreign

countries, and was perpetually being summoned to Japan, or India, Mexico, or other equally remote places.

Meanwhile his wife amused herself, and was immensely popular.

The notes she was now fingering were mostly invitations to various country houses or pleasure resorts. She had asked Paula Drewe to lunch and to discuss *her* plans before finally deciding upon her own.

She was fond, in her selfish way, of the girl, whom she had known from school days upwards. They had drifted apart yet never lost sight of one another. Paula had just distinguished herself by painting an exquisite portrait of her friend. It had been exhibited at Grosvenor, and every one who saw it had fallen in love with it.

It was so ideal, they said.

Mrs. Leslie Bruce was not quite sure whether she ought to accept that universal judgment as a com-

pliment. She thought the portrait an admirable likeness, in a fantastic setting. But she had never grown weary of hearing people say, "How lovely!" as they paused before it; and had passed many portions of many afternoons in the gallery for the express purpose of listening to unbiassed criticisms on her hair, eyes, and figure.

She came to the conclusion that Mr. Leslie Bruce was an unappreciative husband, and that mild flirtations were necessary to existence—and ideal portraiture.

"I did n't mean to be unkind," said Paula. She had heard the *vox humana* often enough to gauge the genuineness of its expression.

"You dear thing—of course not! I'm sure of that. Let me see, what were we talking about?"

"You," said Paula, "were painting my future *sans* lovers, *sans* husband, *sans* most things that women covet—or abuse."

"Oh, I did n't quite mean that. You are sure to have—chances."

"That," said Paula, "sounds more hopeful."

"In fact, you might marry any one—if you cared about it."

"The fact—or the person?"

"Don't be absurd. You know what I mean. Let me see, how old are you?"

"Twenty-four: two years younger than ——"

"Yes, yes, of course, I might have remembered, Well, I want you to come with me to Scotland. That is what I asked you here for to-day."

"Isn't it rather short notice?"

"I don't mean that I'm *going* to-day. Not till next week in fact. I've come up for dresses and things. Tweeds and waterproofs are all one wants. The place is in the Highlands, and the owner of it is a sort of cousin, I think, of Leslie's. . . . You know that Scotch cousinships are something

fifty times removed. She is a Mull and he is a Bruce, and some deceased Mull once married a deceased Bruce. I've only seen her once. She was a terrible old lady, with short skirts, flat-soled boots with *elastic* sides, my dear, and a front. Leslie says I must be polite to her. She is very rich, and can leave her money to any one she likes."

"But surely you have enough money?"

"*Enough?* My dear Paula, as if one ever had enough money in this world! I'm sure even the Prince of Wales would like his income doubled. Enough money—why, I'm worried to death with debts, and Leslie is so disagreeable if I show him a bill. But that's no matter now. The question is, will you take pity on me and come with me? I've *carte blanche* to bring any friend I wish—*female*, of course. Dear old Tabby would be shocked beyond expression if

I came with a male escort. She tells me that a nephew and a friend of his are also coming to stay for some weeks, so we sha'n't be quite a hen convention. You'll have fine scenery to paint, and fine air to breathe—and bagpipes and Highland sports, and all that by way of local colour. Do say 'yes.' "

Paula laughed. "The local colour sounds very tempting," she said. "And I've never been to Scotland. I'm half inclined——"

"Oh, make it 'whole' and put me out of suspense. You're so fortunate. You've no one to consult. I always think you're the luckiest girl I know."

"And the loneliest, perhaps," said Paula, with a sudden shadow on brow and eyes.

"That is entirely your own fault. But we are drifting away from the point of decision. Here is Lady Tabitha's letter. Shall I accept it on your behalf as well as my own?



Then we'll drive to Scott's and order tweeds. I wonder whether the Mull tartan is presentable. It would be a pretty compliment to appear gowned in it."

"Oh, I draw the line at tartans!" exclaimed Paula, in genuine horror. "Go to Scott's by all means, but I'll take the liberty of designing my own costumes for the occasion."

"Ah," said Mrs. Leslie, reflectively. "You never do dress like anybody else."

She sat down and wrote her letter.

"I've fixed the 11th," she said.

Paula nodded. "That leaves me free for the 9th," she said.

"It will be the last model night at the studio this term."

"I can't imagine why you go to classes and things," said Mrs. Leslie, comprehensively. "You draw and paint as well as any woman artist I know of."

"There might be one or two

you don't know of," suggested Paula. "In any case I am a long, long way from the top of the tree, and I mean to get there."

"I suppose you like it," murmured Mrs. Leslie, with a glance at her ruffled golden locks. "But I should think it was ever so much nicer to be only a woman."

"You can attain your ambition very easily."

"One enjoys life so much more."

"There are different ideas of enjoyment, Nettie."

"Well, we never did agree about that. Even at school I had all the fun and you all the work."

"What you call 'fun,' Nettie, sometimes means very hard work, and no satisfactory reward."

"You are so dreadfully serious, Paula. I'm sure if it was n't for me you would have—— Was that the bell? Gracious! I'm sure it's Algy. Don't go, tell him I'm dressing, and entertain him for two minutes while I fix my bonnet."

“ But——”

There was no answer save a *frou-frou* of skirts, and a closing door.

Then a footman announced—

“ Dr. Grantley Dering.”

### CHAPTER III.

HE advanced into the room with the well-bred ease and composure of the society doctor. It was the *rôle* he had set himself. He felt assured that a man could make his own position if he only went to work the right way. Tact and resolution were his only weapons. He had to deal with a sex whom he despised at heart, but who stood as the motive power of success. The pet physician of fashionable women has an easy time of it. Foibles and fancies take the form of disease, and he has no very severe calls on skill, though he might levy a heavy tax on patience. Dr. Grantley Dering had very little

idealism in his nature, and had—up to the present—only classified women under the one heading—Sex. He was talented, cool-headed, and ambitious, but he knew that fortune is the easier road to fame, and to secure fortune he must have the trick of popularity. He prided himself on being a keen student of human nature, and yet never troubled to study that complex side of it which sways to the tide of woman's whims, and woman's passions, and woman's influence.

The calm, serious eyes of Paula Drewe were to him only a woman's eyes. He failed to read the soul that looked through their clear light.

While she apologised for her friend's absence and entertained him for ten minutes, he fully recognised the charm of manner that made her simplest words interesting, but he never for a moment forgot the necessity of

impressing his own personality on her.

She recognised this, and it amused her. She let him believe he was drawing out her own idiosyncrasies while in reality she was studying his. "A masterful nature masked by courtesy, despising what it flatters," she thought.

He did not formulate any distinct opinion of her—then.

Mrs. Leslie Bruce hurried in. The mysterious poise of a bird and a twist of lace, represented a Parisian bonnet that had taken ten minutes to adjust.

"Ah, Dr. Dering! How delighted I am to see you! Were n't you surprised to find me in town? Only passing through, you know. Those odious dressmakers and tailors! I'm off to Scotland next week. How nice of you to call! That tonic did me *so* much good. I told Lady Crewkerne about you the other day. She is a woman full of complaints, and has

always one unique disease on hand. She must be invaluable to your profession. She makes an illness fashionable at once."

Dr. Dering smiled. "Thanks for the recommendation," he said. "It was about that I called. I have just had a letter from the lady in question. She seems to have a complete mastery over medical terms and phrases."

"Ah, she's quite a character. You don't mean to say she requires you already?"

"I am requested to call to-morrow morning. I fear the absence of a brougham will go a long way to mitigate the success of a prescription."

"Oh, the brougham will follow soon enough if you get into Lady Crewkerne's good graces. She is worth a good five hundred a year to a doctor. The worst of it is she changes them almost as often as she does her ailments."

"Perhaps," suggested Paula, "they are too candid."

She met Grantley Dering's eyes, and fancied they looked disapproving.

"You approve of blunt honesty?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly. It may n't be the *best* policy—it is certainly the most honourable."

"It is often an unwise one," he said.

"There spoke worldly wisdom. To selfishly consider one's own benefit at the expense of truth to another is surely an ignoble proceeding."

"You speak from the standpoint of independence, I imagine. In the world—as it exists—individual benefit must be considered."

"How dreadfully serious you both are," laughed Mrs. Leslie.

"Of course we are all selfish—more or less—we can't help it. And if you 'll take my advice, Dr.



Dering, you will be just as selfish as ever you can in respect of Lady Crewkerne. I've set my heart on your success, you know, and this is the first stepping-stone."

"You are more than good to take so much trouble on my behalf," he answered, and then felt vexed that the words were so conventional, and that the accent of gratitude was less fervent than he meant it to be.

That clear gaze seemed to read him like an open page set before it, and the faint curl of the lips was decidedly scornful. He did his best to ignore her during the remainder of his visit. Mrs. Leslie's chatter was always amusing, and never flagged. Yet he wondered why the contrast between shallow brook and full, deep stream presented itself to his mind.

There was nothing frivolous about Paula Drewe. He almost wished there had been. It was a new sensation for him to feel un-

comfortable in a woman's presence. He was so used to be a dominating power that he rebelled instinctively against criticism on the part of a sex he had affected to despise.

He sat on in Mrs. Bruce's pretty room for another ten minutes, feeling that his face was being studied and his words weighed, and he disliked the process. He never once glanced in the direction of the white-gowned figure by the shaded window, but he was keenly conscious of her presence and her criticism. Had he been a vain man he might have attributed this interest to such causes as vanity permits, but he had no such weakness, despite personal charm and self-appreciation. The one was unconscious, and the other dealt entirely with mental characteristics and a well-balanced brain. When at last he rose to take leave of his hostess and her friend there was something of constraint in his manner.

He remembered she had alluded to a visit to Scotland, and would have liked to mention his own movements, but the words would not come easily, and the desire to leave the room and that haunting face behind him became stronger than any other feeling.

Once he had closed the door and was master of himself, he felt a positive rage at his temporary folly. It was so unaccountable, so idiotic, so totally at variance with any previous experience. He tried to sweep it away with the force of strong will and supreme self-control. He believed in free will, in absolute independence, and yet he could not forget the grave, searching glance of a woman's eyes. They haunted him throughout the day and gleamed through his dreams that night. And he knew nothing about her—not even her name. Mrs. Leslie Bruce had omitted to introduce them formally.

The next morning he laughed

at himself, and resolutely banished the impression. A new patient has always points of interest for a physician, and he had determined that Lady Crewkerne was to be his stepping-stone to fortune.


A hansom had to supply the place of a brougham at present, and he presented himself at Belgrave Square with exemplary punctuality. The invalid awaited him in a boudoir eminently suited to her complexion. She was sixty, but nowadays no woman need allow herself to look that age. Her hair was very golden, and her teeth ivory white, and her complexion of milk and roses. She had a fragile figure, and delighted in tea-gowns and Greek draperies. When she drove out her cushions were a framework on which she lay in interesting helplessness, smothered in black sables in winter, and Oriental draperies in summer.

The roseate tints of her complexion were certainly no adver-

tisement of delicacy, and she was as well known in the Row as the Achilles monument.

She had a weakness for doctors, but the moment she ceased to be *the* patient to them, her *amour propre* was offended.

Dr. Dering pleased her at once. He was good-looking, he was young, he was courteous. Above all, he permitted her to explain her own case and prescribe her own remedies. When she expressed a desire for champagne, he merely said, "By all means—but *dry*. . . ." And, as she detested sweet, she felt that her new adviser had every prospect of succeeding in his profession. She told him he must see her every day, and when he suggested four visits a week as sufficient she made up her mind that he was a treasure in the shape of doctors, and that he had her true interests at heart. Previous physicians had jumped at the idea of that daily guinea.



He amused and entertained her for the best part of half an hour, and left behind an elaborate prescription of simple remedies, and an agreeable impression of sympathy and appreciation.

He walked along the square in the hot August sunshine. The brougham and the practice seemed nearer than ever they had seemed before. At any cost, at any sacrifices, he must keep in Lady Crewkerne's good graces, even if it meant giving up his holiday and his trip to Scotland.

It was odd that with the thought of Scotland those words rang again in his ears: "To selfishly consider one's own benefit at the expense of truth to another is surely an ignoble proceeding."

There had been no word of truth or sincerity in this interview. He had deliberately traded on a woman's weakness for his own ends and purposes. Had he spoken the truth, had he been honest in

one single particular, the doors of that house in Belgrave Square would never have opened for him again. It would have been absurd, quixotic, to treat Lady Crewkerne as truth and honesty suggested. Besides, if he had not humoured her, some one else would. No one stands alone in this world in any matter of doubtful dealing. It has, moreover, an accepted standard, and is the root of all great financial success. Only when it *is* success it ceases to be doubtful, and the nature of its origin is unquestioned.

In ten years' time, with a brougham, high-stepping horses, a reputation, and a house in Harley Street, Dr. Dering might become oblivious even of a Lady Crewkerne.

He shook off reflections and scruples and went to hospital duty. For once it seemed irksome and unpleasant. The crowded wards, the pain-wrung faces, the loathe-

someness of disease, and the hopelessness of remedy struck like discordant notes on the memory of a rose-hued, flower-scented boudoir, a languid voice, the *dilettante* tampering with fashionable fancies.

Both led to the same end by widely different means. Was he to blame for preferring the flower-strewn path to the thorny one? Once he had his foot on the ladder, he meant to reach its topmost step. His fame should be world-wide. He felt within him the possibilities of success. He could not pause to weigh the means by which it should be conquered.

Most of us are mastered by our desires. They make Life positive instead of passive. How far those desires are biassed by circumstances or ruled by emotions we cannot say. We feel the bondage while evading the service, or calling it by another name more pleasing to our vanity.

Grantley Dering liked to pose to



himself as strong, unemotional, self-sufficient. The truth is at all times unpalatable, so he never administered it to others, or inflicted it on himself.

But one cannot always face life in an elusive spirit. The hour of reckoning is as sure as the hour of Death.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE model sat on the platform, lightly draped and weary-eyed. There were about a dozen students at work in the large room, all intent on utilising a last opportunity.

Some had attained a high stage of proficiency and were conscious of that sublime discontent which is Art's choicest gift and best incentive. Among these, noticeably, were one woman and one man.

The great painter to whom the studio belonged, and who condescended to instruct by means of sarcastic comment or judicious praise, had just passed through the room and surveyed the various efforts.

To Paula Drewe he had said nothing. She was the female victim to entire dissatisfaction with the work of a term.

On one man only had he bestowed that valued commendation so rare, and so eagerly sought.

"You have treated the subject magnificently, Mr. Hope, but your picture ought to be in a more finished condition."

The girl at the next easel glanced at her companion.

"You haven't touched it since the last time you were here?" she remarked.

"No," he said, and looked foolishly at the canvas and then at the beautiful face beside him. "If I had——"

He paused, and she resumed her brush. She rarely spoke, and at present felt less interest in the reasons for her companion's idleness than in the quality of his work. Christopher Hope wondered whether she had remarked the

eyes of the woman in his picture. They were not the model's eyes at all. He intended to call it "*Träumerci*" (Dreams).

A girl was seated at a piano. Her fingers might have been interpreting Schumann's weird composition, but her eyes—strange, deep, wistful—held within themselves fancies, hopes, possibilities that dimly suggested a sorrowful awakening.

They were Paula's eyes, but she was unconscious of that expression. It had not yet haunted her "looking-glass hours." In moods and dreams it was visible, but then she never *saw* herself, only felt her consciousness, her dissatisfaction, and her vain longings for something in Life that it had never granted, that it might never grant, for all her prayers, or desires.

She worked on and he watched her. She had conscientiously obeyed the subject given and faithfully portrayed the model.

He—had done neither. Yet instinctively she felt that he had been the best interpreter of the master's suggestion.

When the next interval for rest came round, and the model could relieve her strained muscles, and the students their chained tongues she turned again to Christopher.

"I wonder," she said, "what made you think of that?"

"You," he said on the impulse of the moment and speaking the truth with no atom of exaggeration. It never sounds so *unlike* truth as when we do that.

Her grand, wonderful eyes swept over him in mute wonder. She did not blush or look confused. He did both.

"I . . . I beg your pardon," he stammered, "I should n't have said it. Only—only——"

Then she smiled compassionately, as a superior being on a poor, foolish blundering piece of inferiority.

"Why should you not, if it is true?" she asked. "Art is above conventionality. The subject is less important than the treatment, in my opinion. Your treatment is wonderful."

He flushed like a schoolboy. It was not becoming. Very few men look well under the influence of strong emotion, any more than under the influence of strong wine. Both have an enfeebling and demoralising effect upon them. Only women have succeeded in poetising the tragic side of life.

She mercifully looked away, and allowed him time to cool. At the same moment the door opened, and astonishment usurped her brief interest. The man who entered and made his way up to Christopher Hope was no other than her acquaintance of the previous week. As his glance lighted on her she saw him start. The meeting was a surprise to both, and an additional one to Chris-

topher. He had seen his friend every day. He had heard of Lady Crewkerne, and yet Grantley Dering could have been presented to this Wonder of Womanhood and—forgotten to mention it!

As they spoke, and as their words explained the fact of previous acquaintanceship, Christopher grew enlightened. Yet the fact of Dering's silence was paramount in his mind.

The girl herself talked freely and unaffectedly, chiefly on art and on matters artistic. Grantley Dering listened, watched, observed, and wondered whether physiognomy is a better guide to character than the beat of pulse is to the condition of health. If so, those full, deep orbs, those mobile lips, that calm brow, that expression where melancholy melted into sweetness, were tokens of no common character. He remembered Christopher's words: "She

is incomprehensible," after a long discussion on her beauty and genius and grace. He remembered too his own answer, "That is only to say she is a woman." Now he felt her womanhood as at once a mystery and a charm. Yet he could give no explanation as to why he should feel it.

Her voice was of that rich deep contralto timbre which makes the gift of speaking commonplaces almost an art, but exalts the ability to speak *well* to the point of genius.

She aroused his interest and conjecture. Never more than when she quietly allowed that she lived alone, that she was without any near relatives, and had resolved to devote Life to art.

Christopher Hope listened in silent ecstasy, well content that his friend should do all the talking, and admiring his unwonted brilliance. He had never heard the girl speak so freely or so well.



Yet no key-note of jealousy was struck in his heart.

That the woman he adored in secret and the friend he admired so openly should find mental ground of interest pleased rather than alarmed him. By nature he was entirely unsuspicious. The true artist always keeps something of the child in his nature. It is a failing the world does its best to eradicate. When it succeeds it dimly recognises a loss, and talks of "realism" instead of "ideality."

A chance word in the conversation caught Christopher's ear suddenly, "Scotland"—

He looked up eagerly. The girl was speaking. "I have never been there," she said. "It will mean entirely new ground. But I feel I owe myself a holiday, and the opportunity is tempting."

"What part of Scotland?" asked Christopher, anxiously.

"The north, some place up in the Highlands. I have n't suc-

ceeded in mastering the name yet. My friend Mrs. Bruce has invited me to accompany her."

"I too am going to Scotland, to the Highlands," announced Christopher. "It could n't by any possibility be that Drumlochrie is your destination?"

"That is the name. How very strange! The old lady is a relative of my friend's."

"And she is my aunt!" exclaimed Christopher, his whole face radiant with delight. "We shall all meet there then. Dering is coming with me."

"I'm not sure of that," interposed Grantley. "It depends solely on my new patient."

The girl looked up quickly. "Lady Crewkerne? Oh, you *are* installed there then?"

He felt annoyed at the slight tinge of sarcasm in her voice. "Her health is seriously impaired," he said. "And she is in a highly nervous condition. I

should not feel justified in leaving her at present."

"But what am I to do?" lamented Christopher. "I had so counted on our having this holiday together."

Grantley Dering shrugged his shoulders somewhat impatiently. It had been no sacrifice of inclination to put off that visit, yet he was conscious suddenly of a feeling of regret that he had done so.

Paula Drewe had turned to her easel during the discussion. She was reflecting on coincidences. The unspoken homage of her fellow-artist had scarcely impressed her hitherto. His words to-day had brought it before her in a new light, and the prospect of renewing this chance intimacy under entirely different circumstances was not altogether unpleasing.

She heard the two men talking together a few moments longer. Then the conversation was interrupted by the return of the model

and the signal for work. Dering took his leave and she went on painting.

Her picture was almost finished. She could take her holiday with a clear conscience. Her neighbour watched her steady hand and unfaltering touch with wonder and admiration. Every pulse in his body was thrilling with rapture. He could scarcely believe that Fate was to favour him in so unexpected a fashion. His aunt suddenly became a beneficent fairy, and Mrs. Leslie Bruce a ministering angel. Drumlochrie Castle was transformed into a palace of delight, instead of the dreary dungeon he had represented it. He wished his companion would give him any excuse to speak again. But she would not. Eye and hand and thought were all engrossed with her subject. She had forgotten his existence.

. . . . .

Paula Drewe lived in a tiny flat in Chelsea. She was unhampered by any closer domestic ties than an aunt and uncle, who, being of the Methodist persuasion, had seen in art only the signs of "falling away from grace," and left her to follow her own devices to the accompaniment of godly warnings and alarming prophecies. Paula's tastes could be traced to no direct hereditary principles. Some dead and gone Drewe had once been an actress, but her memory had long been consigned to oblivion by a branch of the family to whom all things of art and beauty savoured of Evil. Paula's tastes and talents were utterly obnoxious and utterly misunderstood. Fortunately she was too independent to waste time on useless explanations and still more useless arguments.

The money she inherited at the death of her parents enabled her to be completely independent.

She took an old family servant to live with her as housekeeper and protector, and devoted herself entirely to art. Her life was arduous and extremely simple. It did not prevent people from hinting that it was improper. She had few friends and rarely went into any society except that of Mrs. Leslie Bruce. Her holidays were usually spent in quiet, out-of-the-way nooks and corners—avoided of tourists and shunned by “trippers.” But she invariably gave nine months of the year to work.

It was a strange life for a young girl, but it was the life that suited her, and she loved its independence above all else. Her nature was self-reliant without being unfeminine. She had been accustomed to think and act and decide for herself, and had grown accustomed to mental and physical loneliness.

When she returned home after long hours of work in the class-

room, she rarely sought any other relaxation than that afforded by books, or a song to her guitar—the only instrument she favoured, and assuredly the one that seemed to understand best her rich, soft voice with its strangely haunting notes. A few girl students who shared sections of the same flat dropped in now and then to sip tea and chatter of success, or hopes, or failure.

One of the most successful was an artist, designed victims of corsets, or wearers of idyllic undergarments, to which she invariably supplied a figure out of all lines of proportion, and a face whose simpering beauty was as well known as the Queen's head on the coin of the realm. But she made five times the money that her fellow artists could make, and was never weary of upholding the merits of success *versus* failure in her own person. Occasionally she illustrated it more forcibly by a di-

vinely lovely gown, or a dashing victoria engaged for the season.

This brought the advantages of hosiery and whalebone home to the feminine mind in a novel and superior manner. It also proved the varied uses of Art, and lent a sacred charm to advertisement.

To Paula Drewe it was sometimes amusing, sometimes wearisome, but rarely entertaining, to listen to these frivolous chatterers who laid claim to her by kinship of their calling. She was not the kind of girl who makes friends readily, or to whom the act of kissing is natural. She was more admired than liked, and had none of the little insincerities which make one of the secrets of popularity.

The night before she was to leave for Scotland Paula Drewe seemed curiously absorbed and thoughtful.

The preparations for her journey were complete. Her costumes



were invariably simple, and the description of her hostess's place of abode and mode of life had suggested no deviation from this rule. She sat by a window which overlooked a portion of the Embankment and gazed from the dusky waters without to the dismantled room within. Change always affected her, and she felt a curious foreboding as she glanced over the familiar things in their unfamiliar aspect. Draperies, photographs, *bric-a-brac* had all been packed into cupboards, or stored safely away for fear of breakage.

The thought in her mind was a combined apprehension and foreboding. She felt as if never again would she sit in this same room in the same spirit of freedom and irresponsibility that had made at once the charm and boast of her life. There was no reason for the thought, and no possible explanation of it. But who yet has discovered any orthodox channel

between intuition and the process which conveys impressions to the feminine brain.

She tried to banish the idea—she attributed it to fatigue, depression, the prospect of change in the mode and conditions of her life. The result was not satisfactory. She rose from her seat and paced the room restlessly.

“If I believed in presentiments,” she said half aloud, “I would write to Nettie even at this last hour and refuse to go to Drumlochrie. But I don’t believe in them, and I should only look ridiculous. Besides, I have never yet broken my word.”

She paused before a mirror let into the wall as a panel, staring in blank, undraped simplicity at its surroundings.

“What possessed him to paint *me*?” she murmured.

Then she met her own eyes and looked at them, and gradually a faint smile curled her lips. “If

only his hair was n't so red," she said. "All the virtues would scarcely atone for that one terrible defect. Yet I suppose somewhere in the world there is some woman who would love him in spite of it. I wonder if in that same world there is also some man whom I shall love in spite of—myself?"

## CHAPTER V.

“ I WAS just wearying to see you, laddie,” said Lady Tabitha, welcoming her nephew in the great hall of Drumlochrie in the dusk of an August evening a week later.

When strongly moved her accent and expressions became national ; at other times she spoke almost as uninterestingly as a southerner. She was a lady of uncompromising aspect and appearance, which belied a natural warm-heartedness. Her nephew held first place in her affections in spite of opposition to cherished plans and a predilection for foreign countries instead of “ his native heath.”

"You're quite by yourself?" she asked presently, as she glanced about. "Your friend the doctor could not leave London, then?"

"No. He has an important patient at present, and she won't allow him a holiday," answered Christopher.

"Ah, well," said the old lady with an affectionate pat on the hand she still held. "You must just content yourself without him. I've two visitors here. One is a bonnie creature, I can tell you. She's fairly won my heart, and I am no easy to please, Christie, as you know. They're about the place somewhere. You'll see them in for tea. I made it later to-night for your sake. You find the bit fire cheerful, I'm thinking."

"Yes," he said, glancing round at the well-known hall, with its ancient heirlooms and severe simplicity that somehow seemed to harmonise so exactly with the straight, vigorous figure and old-

fashion habits of their owner. "You have n't told me your friend's name, aunt," he said suddenly.

"Bruce," she said, "Mrs. Leslie Bruce. She is the wife of my third cousin, Leslie Forbes Bruce. He's a wealthy man and has prospered amazingly. I was wishful to see his wife, but she was long in making up her mind to come so far north as this. I won't say that I'm altogether taken with her. She's a flighty creature, though well favoured eno' as to looks."

"And her friend?" asked Christopher, turning a slightly reddened face away from the keen eyes.

"Miss Drewe, is it? I gave you my ain opinion of her. *She's* not flighty—indeed I'm thinking often she's ower grave and serious for a young creature. But she has no parents, puir lassie, and has had to make her own way in the world, and maybe that's the reason."

“I—I think I know her,” said Christopher. “I met her in London.”

“Aye, London is a grand place for meeting folks,” remarked Lady Tabitha, evidently considering his information as unimportant. “Well, well, I see you’re impatient to be off to your room. You’ll find us all here in fifteen minutes’ time. And Christie—— Why, the laddie’s awa’! What haste he’s in the day.”

Christopher had got out of the hall, and upstairs, and into his own room by sheer instinct.

His head was in a whirl!

She *was* here, then? Here in actual flesh and blood reality. It seemed scarcely credible.

As he splashed cold water over his hot face, and brushed his ruddy locks, and arranged collar and tie, he was trembling like a girl.

All sorts of hopes and imaginings that had been visionary as

dreams seemed now to offer substantial shape and form. The "impossible She of Fantasy" had ceased to be impossible. She would be here under the same roof, she would eat, drink, sleep under the same hospitable cover that sheltered himself. And but a brief time before he had been about to flee from her. Had actually contemplated putting seas between them.

Was this Fate? Had some power stronger and subtler than his own will determined on opposing his plans for some set purpose? Was the queen of his soul no longer *in nubibus*, but a tangible, visible, possible divinity?

He asked for no more than her presence, and could have lived in perfect content on the mere skirts of ecstasy. He was not at all a young man of the time. He favoured neither the reckless, slangy, music-hall, betting youth, nor the curious, pessimistic, languid creat-



ure whom depravity has made fashionable, and literature ridiculous; whose art is as false as his nature is shallow, and who embodies the highest wisdom of speech in an epigram.

Perhaps Christopher Hope would have been the better for being more practical and less tender hearted. But life had taught him no very hard lessons yet, and he was still a dreamer at its gates.

. . . . .

The great hall of the castle looked unusually gay and cheerful as Christopher returned to it.

The blazing logs threw out bright gleams and flashes on the antique silver tea service beside which sat Lady Tabitha in her usual severe black dress and white lace cap. Hot cakes and scones steamed on a tripod before the fire. A large deer-hound lay stretched in lazy content on the

rug, great bunches of heather and rowan berries were set about in vases or bowls of quaint china, and the old portraits, and bronzes, and pottery made a fitting background to the living figures of the two pretty women lounging in tea-gown ease and negligence in their low chairs.

"My nephew Christopher. Nettie, my dear, let me present him to you as a sort of fourth cousin. Miss Drewe—my nephew."

Christopher bowed, then advanced and held out his hand.

"Miss Drewe and I have already met, as I told you, aunt," he said.

"You never told me, my dear, that you knew my laddie?"

"You never mentioned his name, Lady Tabitha," said the rich, soft voice that held such sweet music for Christopher's ears. "Yes, we are fellow-students," she added.


"Aye, aye, the boy is making his way now," said Lady Tabitha,

proudly. "They say he'll be a grand painter some day. I'm not sure that his forbears would have thought much of him for taking up such a profession. There never was a Mull yet who worked at such a queer business or indeed at any other business. But ye canna make a whole race on the same pattern."

She sighed, and poured out the tea and gave it to Christopher to hand. She would have no servants to spoil the pleasant friendliness of this informal meal.

He gave the two women their cups and handed the scones and cakes, and then seated himself near Paula Drewe with the desperation of newly acquired courage.

Before he had time to address her, however, Mrs. Leslie Bruce pounced on him. The presence of any male thing aroused in her a desire for conquest. She preened her feathers and took up the weapons



of coquetry with the zest occasioned by a long lack of opportunity.

Paula Drewe, to whom her friend's tactics were as well known as the days of the week, listened to the pretty chatter with some amusement. She was studying Christopher under a new aspect. The welcome in his face had been very genuine. No man is tremulous and tongue-tied in the presence of a woman to whom he is indifferent.

Lovers were a new experience to her. She had not had leisure to think of them, as yet. But the most inexperienced woman needs no telling as to when a man is in love with her, and Christopher's blue eyes were singularly eloquent.

"I adore art," prattled Mrs. Leslie. "Have you seen my picture? Paula's picture of me? Charming, entirely charming, you know—Greek draperies, and all that. But of course you've seen it. It was

at the Grosvenor the whole season."

Christopher murmured something indistinctly, and handed the tea-cake.

"You've exhibited of course," she continued, declining the dish. "Academy, I suppose?"

"No," he said. "Not Academy—yet."

"Oh, I thought you were one of the rising men. Did n't Lady Tabitha say so? I'm sure I've heard your name often."

He smiled. He had also heard hers.

"Hope . . . Hope—why, of course. You're a friend of my dear doctor's, are n't you now?"

"If you would give me a clue to his name?" suggested Christopher, wishing he had managed to get that other chair next to Paula.

"His name—did n't I tell you? Dering—Grantley Dering. *Now* you know."

"Yes," he said. "And he told

you I exhibited at the Academy? What could have possessed him?"

"But you're sure to—some day."

"Is one sure of anything? I may have hopes."

"It must be charming to 'do' something," she said reflectively.

"I always tell Paula I envy her. I'm only a butterfly, you know."

"Butterflies," observed Christopher, rising to the occasion, "are very charming—if not absolutely useful."

Then his attention wandered. Lady Tabitha was talking to Paula Drewe, and he tried to catch what they were saying. But Mrs. Leslie inclined to confidences and leant towards him with a softly swaying motion that breathed violets from fluttering laces.

"Do tell me about yourself—your life—your hopes," she entreated. "I know your friend so well that I almost seem to know you."

"I . . . really there is nothing to tell," said Christopher.

"A man's life—a man's ambitions," she suggested, with an expressive glance.

He shook his head. "Mine are too limited to be interesting."

"Has no romance dropped in yet?"

She saw the foolish colour come into his face and knew the arrow had gone home.

"Perhaps I should not ask. But the artist nature is always imaginative and therefore—romantic. It is the only nature to which romance is allowable in these dreadful days of realism. Are you a realist, Mr. Hope?"

"No," he said, somewhat vaguely.

"I am glad to hear it. Most young men are so horribly realistic nowadays. They have n't an ideal at eighteen and are *blasé* at twenty. The only thing that would interest them would be a

new vice. But no Columbus of the senses could discover even that for them."

Christopher looked at her for the first time with attention. He thought it odd that a young, pretty woman should talk like this to a man on first acquaintance. He was lamentably ignorant of the ways of modern society, and the unceasing exertions of the "smart" world to be considered improper.

She met his glance. He had rather nice eyes she thought. Would he be worth "drawing out"?

"Your friend, Dr. Dering, is terribly realistic," she went on. "He has n't an ideal of any sort, unless it's some new disease. I believe he would like to patent a disease if he could. How funny that would be—would n't it? Fancy buying the monopoly of a new complaint like Smith does the book-stalls at the stations! I think I'll suggest it to him."



The look of surprise on Christopher's face deepened to contempt. He thought she was a very foolish little woman, but Mrs. Leslie chirped on despite his silence. She loved her own voice, and considered incessant chatter a sign of brilliance.

"Why did n't you make him come here?" she asked. "If you are his friend you should have influence over him. That is the use of friends. Did he tell you I had sent him a new patient? She will be the stepping-stone of fortune to him if he manages her properly. He might even marry her. She is very wealthy and does n't *look* old. You ought to suggest it to him."

"Dering would n't marry a woman for her money."

"Would n't he? I thought doctors and clergymen always did that. Their professional services demand *some* sacrifice. Do you know Lady Crewkerne?"

"No—not that I am aware of."

"You must have seen her. She is quite one of the sights of London. A Cleopatra in furs—and *such* a complexion! I asked your friend what she looked like in bed, but he would n't tell me."

Christopher's face grew scarlet. Again he offered muffins or tea-cakes, and suggested replenishing her tea-cup.

Paula had crossed over to Lady Tabitha's side, and they were in deep conversation to which he could gain no clue.

"I never believe much in friendship," went on his merciless companion—"at least not in woman's friendship. We are by nature jealous, and jealousy makes us unsafe confidantes. We are jealous of each other's looks, each other's dresses, each other's lovers—especially. Tell me, are men like that? Or does friendship really mean something to them? Now, you and Dr. Dering, for instance?"

"I can answer for myself," he said. "I admire him, I trust him, and I am certainly not jealous of him."

"If a woman came between you that would alter the case. I never knew a really remarkable friendship where something of the kind did n't happen. It is Fate. Picture yourselves now rivals for the same woman, both loving her intensely, passionately, in your different ways—both——"

"Please don't talk like that," pleaded Christopher with sudden annoyance. "It 's so unlikely, and so—distasteful. There could be no question of rivalry between Dering and myself. I could never fancy our caring in the same way for the same woman."

"I don't say you would go out of your way deliberately to do it. That sort of thing is the handiwork of Fate. We don't achieve it—it is thrust upon us. If you knew the world as I know it——"

She sighed and looked down. She thought how stupid he was and how honest, and what a naughty little triumph it would be in this dull place to wake up the quiet nature, disturb the peace, destroy the honesty.

He rose abruptly as she broke off her sentence.

"I am glad," he said, "I don't know the world if it poisons friendships and destroys illusions. I have always thought the simpler we can keep our lives the better we may make them."

"But to be complex is so much more interesting. When you win fame, Mr. Hope, the world claims you——"

"The fame I win," he interrupted, "will not be the sort that interests the world."

"You don't know yet. Success is life to the artist, and success is the worship of crowds, the praise of innumerable tongues. Even Paula there, who is as great a

dreamer as yourself, was not indifferent to public homage. She would spend hours in the neighbourhood of her picture, listening to the praises of those who stood around it."

Christopher glanced at the beautiful face opposite, and was conscious of a sudden pang of disappointment. He could scarcely credit that noble, serene creature with any feeling so ignoble as vanity. He thought of her in the class-room, absorbed, earnest, self-engrossed. Indifferent to admiration, humble before criticism or praise.

Mrs. Leslie watched his gaze, and wondered whether she had an unconscious rival in the field. The thought put her on her mettle.

She was the outcome of fashionable modernity. Frivolous, superficial, good-natured only so far as her own comforts and interests were unconcerned. She distrusted women, and flirted with men, and

took all the good of life that appealed to her nature, or came in her way. Life at Drumlochrie was deadly dull. These few days of it had bored her to death, and boredom was her one terror. Excitement in some shape or form was the very breath of her existence. Pleasurable, unholy, dangerous, but still in some form exciting, so she made up the sum of her occupations and amusements. A new gown, or the *dernier cri* in bonnets were simply desirable if envy or emulation entered into the question of taste.

Christopher Hope would have appealed to her merely as an uninteresting, stupid young man had she not seen that flush rise to his face, or caught that adoring, regretful gaze bent suddenly on Paula Drewe. Then a little malicious sprite crept into her brain, and whispered of possibilities in store for her.

She handed him her empty cup,  
and let him go for the present.

The cat does not keep its paw  
on the captured mouse all the time  
she is playing with it.

## CHAPTER VI.

“DO you know, Paula, you have made a conquest?”

said Mrs. Leslie some hours later as she sat in her friend's room in the most charming of *negligées*, her fair hair rippling to her knees, her bare, rosy feet thrust into fur-lined slippers.

Paula Drewe glanced at her through a cloud of dusky tresses. She had no maid, and performed her toilet duties for herself. She went on brushing her hair, and said quietly, “How have you discovered that?”

Mrs. Leslie laughed. “I have keen eyes for that sort of thing,” she said. “And he is a very ingenuous youth. I don't fancy his temperament resembles his hair.”



"You seemed to take a great interest in him," observed Paula. "You talked to him the whole evening. You played billiards——"

"And how atrociously he played!" she interrupted. "Did I seem to take an interest in him? It was on your account if I did."

Paula looked reflective. It occurred to her that she had heard of other men in whom little Mrs. Leslie had taken the same disinterested interest. Not always with quite so excellent a result as her intentions proclaimed.

"What did you think of him?" she asked presently.

"It might do," answered Mrs. Leslie. "The old lady seems very fond of him. He would be well off, and you have the same tastes. You could live here and paint Scotch mists and Scotch sheep, and eat porridge, like dear old Tabby does. You like a simple life, don't you? That would be

sublimely simple. I recommend it to your consideration."

"If I did n't know you so well, Nettie, I should say that speech sounded a wee bit--spiteful."

"I see local colour is working into your speech already," said Mrs. Leslie. "I wonder if Sandy--Christie--what is his extraordinary name?--is your affinity?"

Paula's dark eyes shot a brief glance of indignation at her questioner. She made no answer. Only coiled up her thick chesnut tresses, and then moved over to the fire and sat down.

"He may not be interesting," she observed presently, "but I am sure he is very good."

"No good people are--interesting," said Mrs. Leslie. "It is impossible to arouse a man to think about you without a *soupçon* of wickedness. We have learned to sin so delightfully nowadays that virtue looks quite colourless. I don't mean to say it is absolutely

necessary to make a *faux pas*, but it is essential to one's reputation to get the credit of having made one."

"Nettie, when I listen to you and look at you I wonder can you possibly be the same girl who shared my schooldays with me. You are so utterly changed."

"My dear, I was always of the earth earthy, even at sweet sixteen, when you were dreaming wonderful dreams and planning a life that could only be possible in Arcadia. There is no Arcadia now, Paula. You will wake from your dreams some day and find that out."

"I don't expect life to be without trouble or anxiety," answered the girl thoughtfully. "But it could never be for me the purposeless, frivolous, sensual thing that you fashionable women make it."

"We enjoy it at all events."

"I don't believe you do. It is

impossible. Seeing the same bored faces, talking the same foolish chatter, eating, drinking, flirting, just to kill time or satisfy jaded senses. What is there in such a life to content any rational thinking being?"

"It shows up *this* sort of life as a brilliant contrast," said Mrs. Leslie, mockingly. "Fashion has its West End and its slums, its Wagner and Chevalier moods. I could n't appreciate heather and Lady Tabitha, if I had n't had a surfeit of orchids and—Orton Vyse."

"Ah!" said Paula, a quick flush mounting to her face. "*That* man has done you more harm than even you are aware of. I cannot imagine how you tolerate him. He is not fit for decent society."

"That," said Mrs. Leslie, laughing, "is probably the very reason; he is in it, if you call society decent. I have doubts—myself."

"Women have run after him,

lionised him, received him," continued Paula rapidly. "No wonder he thinks so badly of them and writes with such utter absence of morality or self-respect."

"You have read his books?"

"I read one book, and the titles of the others. That was quite enough."

Just the very faintest blush rose to Mrs. Leslie's face. "Well, they are rather—broad," she said. "But then he goes everywhere. The Prince took him up tremendously last season. He talks so brilliantly."

"If he talks as he writes," said Paula scornfully, "I can quite imagine how popular he must be! Borrowed phrases, aphorisms turned upside down, unholy jests, the license of a studied impertinence—and you call that brilliant!"

"Ah," said Mrs. Leslie, crossing her dainty ankles, "you have never met him. You cannot understand

his charm, and he is so adorably handsome !”

“I detest handsome men ! They are insufferably conceited, and generally lack brains.”

“You are hard to please, Paula. However, it is consoling to think that Sandy won’t clash with either of those prejudices.”

“Please leave him out of the question, Nettie.”

“How touchy you are to-night, dear !” She rose to her feet, yawning slightly. “It seems quite Arcadian to keep such early hours. But I suppose my complexion will benefit—and my nerves. You have no nerves, have you ? Fortunate girl. Well, good-night. I see you are dying to get rid of me. Dream of Sandy and all his virtues. I shall read myself to sleep over *One Soft Sin*. It is Orton’s last—and wickedest. *Dormez bien !*”

She waved her hand and floated out of the room, leaving behind her the fragrance of violets, and a

certain restlessness and dissatisfaction evoked by her words.

The scent of the one—the taint of the other were somehow inseparable from the personality of Mrs. Leslie Bruce.

. . . . .

The fresh keen air of heath and moorland, clear sky, bright sunshine. These gave pleasant morning greeting to two figures guilty of accidental meeting some three miles from the castle.

Tweed knickerbockers and a Glengarry cap set off Christopher Hope's tall frame and ruddy locks to far greater advantage than ever his town costume had done. As for Paula, her simple serge dress and cloth toque seemed just the most suitable and becoming attire that the mind of woman could have invented. The cool, delicious air had brought colour to her cheeks and light to her eyes. She looked so beautiful and so

gracious that Christopher could scarcely command his feelings or master the difficulties of ordinary greeting, or announce his surprise at meeting her at so early an hour.

"I always rise early in the country," she said simply. "It seems such a shame to waste the beautiful morning hours in sleep."

"How far you have walked!" he exclaimed.

"Only to the Loch—it is my favourite walk. I had no idea the scenery around was so beautiful. I pictured Drumlochrie as a sort of grim fortress crowned with perpetual mists, and guiltless of tree or flower. I little expected such a feast of colour and beauty."

Christopher by a strong effort conquered his first emotion, and plunged into rapid, if not very coherent description of the history and surroundings of the castle, its varying fortunes and declining glory.

She walked by his side over the



rough moor, glorious with golden gorse and purple heather. The lovely outline of hills caught all sorts of light and shadow; two artist temperaments revelled in unexpected and novel effects of colour, in whose effects they agreed art fell lamentably below nature.

Gradually Christopher's shyness melted away before her frank, sweet speech and perfect ease of manner. They had so much in common that conversation presented no difficulties, and that morning walk left them better acquainted with one another than weeks of conventional intercourse could have done.

The inexplicable attraction Paula had had for Christopher could naturally only deepen and concentrate itself more firmly in his heart by such an interview. His dream had taken shape and form.

A feeling, strange, solemn, over-

powering swept over his soul. It seemed to him as if *the* woman meant by Heaven to perfect and complete his life had suddenly taken her place beside him, and turned the whole commonplace work-a-day world into a paradise of glory.

Not often—not to one man among hundreds—is it given to feel like this for any living woman. The false tone of the world, the false code of its morality too often poisons the life-springs of youth ere it is sensible of its own loss.

Such loss had never been the fate of Christopher Hope. His temperament and tastes had alike made vice obnoxious, and art had fenced him round with subtle safeguards of which he was unconscious, but whose influence was far-reaching. He had dreamt of an ideal womanhood, and suddenly realised its possibility. That fact was joy enough. His soul was flooded with golden sunshine,

as perfect as that of the August day itself. To be walking in this frank intimacy with the divinity of his dreams, here in this wild, fair spot "washed clean by God's new day," was bliss beyond his wildest hopes. Her voice held all the music of heaven for his ears. He could have prayed her to speak on and on, content just to listen.

It is a pity that Love so often places a man at his worst before the mistress of his affections. All Christopher's good sense and self-possession seemed to have taken flight. Even his manners suffered. He felt boyish and commonplace before this queen and ruler of his destiny. For he knew at last that she was that. No other woman ever had or ever could have that place. He felt so humble before her that even his full-hearted worship seemed insufficient. Tongue-tied, rapt, so he moved beside her, wishing the hours might stretch

into infinitude—grudging every swift-flying moment that brought them nearer to “good-bye,” and yet making but poor use of them.

When they reached the castle, and she went indoors to remove her hat, he remained standing on the terrace, dazed, bewildered, but more exquisitely happy than ever he had been in his life. He knew the worst and best of what could happen—knew that she was the one woman in the world for him, whether she ever loved him or not.

His love had grown like Jack’s bean-stalk into swift and wonderful magnitude, dwarfing every other thought and consideration, and overthrowing an abstract adoration by might of a real passion.

Swift, sudden, strong as all mastering feelings are, it carried him from point to point with the rapidity of a flood let loose to work its will. What could he do for her—how win a hope—or prove the strength of his love?

His life had been simple, studious, unimportant. Of hers he knew nothing. It did not occur to him that there could be anything to know. Her face inspired the noblest trust, the most perfect confidence.

Like himself she was an orphan, not overburdened with relatives or friends—living for sake of art, and content so to live. She had told him this in the course of their walk together. The simple history seemed just the frame for her grace and beauty and gifts. She and the world had little in common—the world that only ruins artists when it popularises art.

As he paced to and fro, regardless of prayer-bell and breakfast summons, he told himself that the next two weeks must decide his destiny. There seemed nothing strange or sudden in the idea. He had seen her twice a week for the past three months. Their companionship under the same roof

would be closer and more cordial every day. . . . Surely he might hope to win some favour. This great, wonderful, mastering love of his must surely——

“Christy . . . Christy, lad. What are ye dreaming about? I’ve been calling you till I’m just tired o’ calling. Are ye daft, that ye canna hear or heed?—and the leddies waiting their breakfast this long time.”

He started and made a sudden rush for the breakfast-room. The dream-world was at an end. Life suddenly grew practical and commonplace once more.

## CHAPTER VII.

DAY followed day in the harmless monotony of country life. Christopher Hope was no sportsman. He was therefore always at the ladies' disposal. They rode, drove, picnicked, boated on the loch, read, talked, idled, and enjoyed themselves as they felt inclined.

Mrs. Leslie Bruce felt herself supplanted for once, and she did not like it. Her shafts sped harmlessly—her unwholesome coquetry was unheeded. From surprise she passed to irritation, and then to a little malicious bitterness and spite, which somehow leavened the friendliness of the party with a curious distrust.

Lady Tabitha did not like her, and told Christopher so.

“She ’s flighty, laddie, and worse, I ’m thinking. Why is her gudeman always away wi’ himself? A young wife is best under her husband’s protection, and but last night she was telling us that she hadna seen him for twelve months and mair. It ’s no richt, my dear—it ’s no richt, and I ’m regretful that she ’s so friendly with that bonnie thing; Paula. Not but what the lassie ’s staid and canny eno’, despite her heathenish name and independent ways. Ah, weel, Christy, lad, the world ’s turning upside down, I ’m thinkin’. In my young days no lassie would ha thought it decorous to live alone and set up an independent household for herself. I canna bring myself to approve of it, laddie, though I like her well eno’, as I said before.”

She was knitting an uncompromising stocking, and did not look



at her nephew, who was growing red and white, and hot and cold as the subject of his divinity was so ruthlessly discussed.

“All this new-fangled talk o’ art, and the women-folk aye gird-in’ at the men, is no seemly or fitting,” she went on. “Man is the head, and nature meant him to be the head, and no godly, right-feeling woman would ever wish him to be anything else. Let her mind her hoose and her children, and be douce and pleasant and God-fearing, and she ’ll find her place and fit it. She was no meant to be speechifying and prating, and telling man his duties, and wearing his clothes (as I ’m told she does). If ever you ’re thinking of marrying, laddie, just be heedful o’ what you ’re about, and dinna bring such a hybred, upsetting, unnatural sort o’ creature to vex us wi’ her cantrips and notions. When I was young no woman had ‘notions,’ except what her parents and her

minister taught her. And you may be sure *they* were safe. Aye, lad-die, and they made good wives and good mothers, those lassies, and that 's more than the present generation will be doing, or I 'm much mistaken. What are the men about? They must be fules, Christy."

He laughed. "Perhaps they are, aunt, or they 're too lazy to interfere, or else curious to see what women *will* do if they once get their head."

All the time he was thinking of that speech of hers which had set the blood leaping in his veins.-- "*If ever you 're thinking o' marrying.*" He thought of little else now. He had reached that stage when the mystery and impersonality of love became more specific and exacting. He wanted not love only but the creature he loved-- the girl whose life seemed twined and rooted with his own life, filling it with torturing unrest and

fevered longings. She had filled his whole nature with the thought and desire of herself—that passionate craving for perfect union and life-long companionship which constitutes the only perfect love. Stride by stride, step by step, he had marched along the pleasant paths of familiarity and friendliness; but now the portals of Desire were thrown widely open, and he dared to look within and delight himself with the visions of the Promised Land beyond. His love for her had grown into the need of her—a need that seized upon every fibre of his being. He could imagine no possible life without her—no time in earth, or in heaven itself, when he would not want her—with the terrible craving of heart and soul and sense that means—want. His love had reached this stage, assumed these proportions, and yet he had not spoken one word of it to her.

How long would this self-mas-

tery last? How long could he control himself, fearing to put his fate to the test, fearful of the issue? It meant life or death to him now.

"How silent ye are, laddie!" broke in Lady Tabitha's voice at last. "Will you not read your letters? You came in and took them, and they're still lying at your elbow, and ye're speerin' into the fire for all the world like a foolish lassie watching her nuts burn on Hallowe'en. Ye'd best read them before the lassies come in for tea. There's no peace when once that flighty Mrs. Nettie begins cracking her jokes and letting her tongue fly at ye. . . . Why—what's the matter, Christy; no bad news, I hope?"

He had sprung up suddenly from his chair. "No. . . . Oh no, aunt, only a surprise. It's from Dering. He says he can get away at last, and he'll give us a week of his company if you will have it. A wire yes or no to the

Balmoral, Edinburgh. Why, he 's at Edinburgh ! ”

“ Donald can ride to the station, and send a telegram for you. Of course we 'll be only too delighted to have him my dear,” said Lady Tabitha, warmly and hospitably. “ Write your message, and it shall go at once. He 'll be here to-morrow, then.”

“ Yes—to-morrow.”

The ring of pleasant anticipation had gone out of his voice. He was thinking that he had resolved to speak to Paula—to-morrow. But if she refused him, how could he bear to linger on in the torture of conventional friendliness, and how could he leave if Dering joined their party? Should he let matters rest for one week more? Only one week. Fate had been kind hitherto. Surely nothing could happen in—one week?

Happiness makes no long abiding in any human life. A week here, a day there. An hour of

bliss ; a year of peace and prosperity. So, in brief glimpses and snatches, humanity gets its ever-craved-for dream. At best it never satisfies. It is at its highest when we stretch out longing hands that touch but never clasp it. Dreamy, fantastic, a will-o'-the-wisp that every fancy may individualise for itself, so it plays its part in human lives, and usurps the worship of the human heart.

Christopher Hope had dreamed that seven little days could not materially affect his hopes, though they must delay the intentions those hopes had framed.

Life at the castle was much the same as it had been before Grantley Dering's advent. Mrs. Leslie certainly was more flippant, and Paula Drewe more grave and reticent.

One or two small dinners had brought a fresh element into the circle, and re-introduced Christopher to old friends, to whom he seemed a stranger. The Scot, in

his own land, is not perhaps more narrow-minded or short-visioned than any other member of the religious body who profess godliness and harrow their fellow-creatures with the plow of doctrine. But he is trying and self-opinionated.

Christopher Hope had lost touch with the Kirk and its members, and an after-dinner controversy on the Presbyterian *versus* the Episcopalian persuasion was infinitely less attractive now than the thrilling sweetness of a voice singing to a guitar in the neighbouring drawing-room. So, in his opinion, the dinners were not a success, and he summoned up courage to entreat Lady Tabitha not to repeat them.

"We are so much more comfortable by ourselves, aunt," he said.

"And that godless hussy doing her best to beguile your good friend the doctor!" exclaimed Lady Tabitha, casting indignant

glances at Mrs. Leslie in primrose satin and black Chantilly laces. "If that 's being comfortable indeed!"

"Oh, Dering can take care of himself," said Christopher, laughing. "He is armour-proof where women are concerned."

Then his eyes went to Paula. She was sitting near those two laughing chatterers, listening, but apparently not sharing in the conversation. He was not keensighted enough to note the somewhat strained clasp of her hands, the wavering colour in her cheek, as some audacious or cynical speech of Dering's reached her ear.

A week ago she had told herself she hated this man. She hated his cynicism, his worldliness, his cold-blooded indifference to human suffering, his perpetual sneers at women. "A gender in satin," that was what he had said once. The phrase caught her ear and stung her to swift indignation.

•



Only a "gender"—a weak, impersonal, unimportant thing; a pawn on the board of life, where Man was king; a pretty, babbling, frivolous, fantastic creature, uncertain in her moods, impulsive in her fancies; a disturbing influence, but never a beneficial one.

"Not even as a—patient?" she had suggested with flaming eyes.

Whatever there had been in that speech of truth or significance it had certainly made Grantley Der-  
ring start and look for a brief moment disconcerted.

Then he bowed mockingly. "You are right," he said. "She is an important factor in my profession."

To-night Mrs. Leslie was drawing him out on her favourite subject—modern life and modern women. Their satires flew from point to point—the shuttlecock of conversational Badminton. It was a game they both delighted in: doubtful jests, strange suggestions,

subtleties of expression, utter disbelief in redeeming virtues.

How hateful Paula thought it, how the young indignant blood burned in her veins as she listened, attracted and yet repelled—held by the spell of Grantley Dering's eyes and hating him for exercising such a spell even while she yielded to it.

To a keen observer it might have seemed that Dering was sprinkling his poisoned subtleties with deliberate purpose; that he *wanted* to exercise an unholy and dangerous influence over one grand, pure soul that defied him.

But Mrs. Leslie Bruce was not a keen observer, and Christopher Hope was out of earshot.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE week had come to an end. A note of dispersion had sounded, and Mrs. Leslie Bruce had suddenly announced her intention of leaving Drumlochrie and utilising Grantley Dering's escort on the return journey. The announcement was so sudden and so unexpected that it fairly robbed Christopher of sense and judgment.

"She" would pass out of his life—out of his days. Already it was a question of hours, and he had been tongue-tied, hesitating over telling her the great secret of his soul.

When his dazed fancies recovered from the shock, he suddenly

took himself to task for negligence. Brain and heart thrilled anew with passionate longing, and he braced his dormant energies to meet his fate.

He must know the worst or the best (if God were good to him) without delay.

The expression of his face changed. Its softness and dreaminess were replaced by firmness and fire. He would seek her out, tell her of his love, ask her to stoop from her heaven of divine dreams, to be just the wife of a man who loved her. Well, it was the best fate for a woman after all. It was what Nature had made her for, and God had purposed for her. To love and comfort and help one other life that lived for her alone. To take her share in its burdens and triumphs, its failures or success. To drink with him from the cup of mingled joy or sorrow, that is the one sure draught life offers. To complete in him what he too

would complete in her—the welding of dissimilar natures into perfect union.

He found his opportunity sooner than he expected.

Dering had taken himself into the library to write letters—so he said. Lady Tabitha had taken herself off to interview the housekeeper. He was alone in the morning-room when the door opened and Paula entered. She had some books in her hands.

“I took these from the library,” she said. “shall I put them back on their shelves, or will you?”

He went quickly towards her. Her presence was so sudden, so unexpected, that he had no time for any other feeling but the deep joy it brought him. Something in his face—that one look whose meaning a woman feels is momentous for her alone—made her pause and pale before his swift approach. She placed the books on the table, and half turned as if

for flight. He guessed the instinct, and all the man in him rose in pursuit.

"Stay. You must hear me ! Paula !"

He saw the blood fly back to her cheek. She stopped and looked at him.

He could not hesitate or draw back now. In simple words—uneloquent as all genuine emotion is—he told her the secret that had burned in his heart these happy weeks. She neither spoke nor moved ; only her cheeks grew paler every moment, and her hands tightened in their clasp.

"I—I can't expect you to care for me as I do for you. I'm not so presumptuous ; but, oh, Paula, give me some hope. I love you so. You've become everything to me. I can't fancy life—the future—anything now without seeing you in the picture."

He paused then. His breath failed, and the beating of his heart

was painfully forcing itself on his notice.

The girl looked at him ; straight, full, into those beseeching blue eyes—the one redeeming point in his face.

“I am sorry,” she began ; “I cannot say that I was—unaware—of your feelings. Let me be honest with you, even at the risk of seeming unwomanly.”

“You could never be that,” he interposed.

“I have never cared for any man,” she went on steadily. “I—don’t believe it is in me to love in—that way—the way you speak of. But lately I have felt a bitter sense of my own loneliness. I want a friend I could trust ; I want sympathy, support, tenderness. Women don’t give all these things to women. I have wondered lately if a man does.”

“A man who loves you would give all this and more,” said Christopher.

"But what would he exact in return?"

"Love does not exact. It takes what is granted—humbly, thankfully. It feels its own littleness, its own unworthiness so keenly, that all it gives is nothing in comparison with what it gains."

"Why should you love me?" she went on, her voice less steady now, but her eyes deeply earnest. "You know nothing of me; you cannot tell if I am good or bad; you don't know my history, my temperament, my faults."

He smiled. "I know all I care to know," he said. "We have been a month under the same roof; but I loved you before then. I think I loved you the first time I ever saw you. Do you remember?"

She waved aside reminiscences.

"There is an old saying about 'two of a trade,'" she said.

His face flushed. "Your words speak hope; but my question is unanswered."



"I cannot answer it—now."

"Yet you said it was no surprise. That you knew—had guessed. Has your heart nothing to say?"

"I told you I was not impressionable or romantic. I have only cared for art. Human loves and griefs and hopes don't interest me, I wish they did."

She moved away and crossed over to the window and stood looking out at the terrace. He stood in dumb misery watching her, afraid to speak, yet longing to urge his love and plead its cause once more.

Suddenly she turned towards him.

"I ought not to keep you in suspense like this. I told you I would speak frankly. If I thought that your love would *compel* mine, that it would satisfy, rest, content me, I would marry you."

"Paula!"

She held out a warning hand.

"I said 'if.' Do you fathom all the possibilities of that little word?"

A sense of blankness and desolation fell upon him. "Then my hopes are vain," he said. "You feel I could never satisfy you?"

"I feel no one could. You do not stand alone. I like you—I feel I could trust you. I think you are an honest, clean-souled man——"

"Ah . . ." he said sharply, "you do not love me?"

"No ; but I am very sure I shall never 'love' as you call it. I wish we could be just friends, you and I ; good friends, true, sympathetic, long-suffering. What is this love that men and women alternately laud and desecrate? I cannot understand it? Surely life can be lived without it."

She sighed wearily, and that sigh went home to his heart as nothing she had yet said or done.

It seemed to breathe her youth, her loneliness, her strange, strong, yet feminine nature, craving it scarce knew what ; alive with genius and beauty, yet dead to the sweeter, commoner impulses of mere womanhood.

A strong tide of feeling swept over his checked and half-chilled passion.

He held out his hands, and the imperative gesture brought him closer to her. She let her own go out to his entreaty, and they stood there for a moment gazing into each other's face.

"If you trust me—if you care ever so little—if there is no one else, then let me be that friend," he cried entreatingly. "I cannot take back what I have given. I cannot learn to unlove you. I only want to be allowed to go on loving you ; to have some place in your life."

He thought to himself : "Friends may be lovers—some day. It is a

beginning . . . and she is so unlike other women."

He still held her hands, still stood lost in an ecstasy of wonder at her touch and nearness and gracious condescension. He was too humble a lover, poor Christopher. Women like to be mastered even against their will.

The door behind them opened suddenly. A woman's little silvery laugh broke across their dream, and brought them back to the world of commonplace once more.

"A thousand pardons! I was not aware I was intruding! Paula, my dear, my maid has finished my packing, and will do yours if you permit. I came to ask you——"

Some strange impulse seized upon Christopher. He drew one of those suddenly tremulous hands within his own, and faced the intruder with gleaming eyes and a check flushed with proud determination.

"I am glad to say, Mrs. Bruce, that Paula will stay on at the castle a little longer, at my request."

"Indeed? Pray accept my congratulations. . . . I must say I am surprised. Paula, you have upset all my plans. What am I to say to Mrs. Halkett? We are due there after leaving Scotland!"

Paula glanced at Christopher with sudden wonder. He had certainly cut the ground from under her feet.

"Do you wish to go very much?" he asked.

"I should not mind for a few days. I believe I did promise. She wished to speak to me about her portrait."

"But there is no need to start to-morrow."

"Oh, no." She smiled faintly. It seemed odd that he should suddenly have become the arbiter of her doings, and yet it was not unpleasant. "Certainly not to-mor-

row," she went on, catching a look in Mrs. Leslie's eyes that she did not like.

The cat is never *quite* prepared for a final spring on the part of the mouse that means escape. Mrs. Leslie Bruce had never anticipated such a result as this, even from three weeks' constant companionship. Was Paula really going to be sensible at last? and marry and settle down just like any ordinary woman?

So much for art and high-falutin' ideas! Yet she felt annoyed that Christopher should have been so easy a conquest: That *her* bow and spear had not claimed another victim. Too much a woman of the world to betray such annoyance, she could but content herself with little waspish stabs and thrusts, that Christopher was too happy and Paula too bewildered to notice. At this early stage of their strange compact, the girl hardly realised to what she stood self-

committed. A vague promise—a faint pity for the suffering and longing she had read in those honest eyes—had it meant that she would accept his worship, his name, himself, and give nothing?

She seemed to be letting herself drift into unknown responsibilities, and yet a curious inert passivity took the place of her usual energy. She felt as if she had reached a stage where she no longer cared to stand alone.

The vague longing to be loved was more to her than the actual fact of a lover. Nettie had prophesied she would never have one, she remembered—never draw to herself that whole-hearted worship which most women crave, and a rare few obtain.

Instinctively she knew the worth of such a love as Christopher Hope's—its strength and purity and unselfishness. But above and beyond all else she felt its wonderful promise of shelter and safety

against some hour of danger dimly recognised. A curious morbid impulse had of late awakened, and waged a hateful warfare with all preconceived theories. She had begun to mistrust herself and to fear herself. It seemed as if in the near future a time would arise when she would feel the most intense need of help, human help, sympathetic help, a help that would be at once strong and tender—granting and gaining trust, offering a figurative hand-clasp at some momentous moment.

Why she should feel this, why she should have accepted that hand-clasp, in this impulsive, indefinite fashion she could not tell. Yet she breathed more freely. She felt strong with a new strength, braced with new energy. Morbid feelings, unhealthy thoughts fled suddenly into the region of unreality. Life—simple, earnest, hopeful life—once more spread itself before her like a landscape



of familiar beauty—the landscape she had known so well and deemed so perfect just a week ago.

A week ago. Was it only a week?—seven little days of idle hours and idle talk that had sufficed to turn content into unrest?

. . . . .

“Forgive me,” said Christopher, when they were again alone. “I don’t know what made me do it. It seemed as if I could n’t lose you, could n’t let you go.”

She smiled faintly. “I think I rather liked having things settled for me in that way. I am so tired of having to do everything and decide everything for myself.”

“But to return to the main point,” said Christopher, “our compact. You see, it is rather difficult to explain to people. My aunt, for instance.”

“She is a dear old thing and I ’m very fond of her. But I sup-

pose you 're right. She would n't quite understand this."

"I 'm not quite sure that I understand—this," answered Christopher. His courage grew apace at the unexpected success of his strange wooing. "I should like to know, positively, if you really think that some day you could bring yourself to think of marrying me."

"Marriage"—she gave a little shudder—"has never presented itself to me as a very desirable thing. It seems to make such a difference in people who have been quite nice before. If I married you I should feel I had sacrificed you to an impulse that we might both repent."

"To repent by your side," said Christopher, "sounds a very pleasant possibility."

"Ah, don't jest. I am really serious. Suppose we leave marriage out of the question for a time——"

"How long a time?"

She made a little restless movement, "How long? . . . I don't know. Don't take too much for granted. If I only felt I could trust myself. There seems something warring within me of late; I can't understand it, I am not to be depended on. The consequences of this decision terrify me more than the actual fact."

"Paula," cried Christopher in sudden desperation, "let me take you out of yourself. You are growing morbid and self-distrustful. You live too much alone. You want natural, healthy life about you; I shall not be exacting, I shall not interfere with your art life. That, Heaven be thanked, is a mutual meeting-ground for us. Can you not trust me with yourself?"

"Yes," she said simply. "I feel I could do that. But you will want something more?"

He flushed to the roots of his ruddy hair. "Never more than

you are willing to give. I have faith that my love will compel your own."

"It is a rash experiment," she said. "I am not sure——"

"Dearest," he cried passionately, "all the arguments and discussions we can bring to the subject only mean that I love you with all my heart can give. That I want you, as only a man wants the *one* woman in the world for him; that I shall be your faithful friend, your devoted lover, no matter what happens; that I want to make you happy, and I believe I can do it. I at least can give you a brighter and less arduous life than you now live. You know," he added gently, "that this place will be mine, some day."

She started. "No," she said, "I did not know that."

"We will travel, we will go to Italy, Greece—wherever I have heard you say you would care to go," he went on. "I see a bright

enough future before us . . . us." He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. "Ah, Paula," he said below his breath, "if you only knew what that word means for me!"

She drew her hand gently away. Then a sudden feeling of compunction made her lay it on his shoulder with the careless caress she might have bestowed upon a faithful dog.

"How good you are!" she sighed. "I wonder why you love me? I never thought any man ever would care for me in—that—sort of way."

He assured her then that he could not understand the whole world of men caring for her in any other sort of way.

## CHAPTER IX.

“SIX months,” said Mrs. Leslie Bruce. “Six months! . . . Well, it is long enough to repent. I found sufficient time in one. I wonder which of them regrets the most?”

She was drawing on her gloves in the drawing-room of her pretty flat. She was expecting some people to dinner. The clock on the mantelpiece indicated five minutes to the hour appointed for arrival.

She was as pretty as ever, as heartless as ever.

A close observer might have detected that her smile rarely found answer in her eyes now, that a faint little line showed between her carefully arched brows, that her colour remained steadily in its

place, and something of the sparkle and light of youth had gone out of the whole face. But society is not a very close observer, and the outside of the cup and platter serves it well enough.

Her dress was even more exquisite than usual. She knew women would find so much occupation in criticising it that their eyes would leave her face alone.

The door opened.

"Dr. and Mrs. Grantley Dering," announced an impassive footman.

Mrs. Leslie fluttered forward with outstretched hands.

"Dear Mrs. Dering—how sweet of you! You were able to come after all? When I got your note I was in despair. How are you, doctor? What wonders you have performed for your wife!"

They shook hands, and Grantley Dering offered the most inviting-looking of the many chairs to his wife.

She had married him in gratitude for his services, and endowed him with the wealth, the carriage, and the Harley Street mansion that had once been the dream of a certain August morning.

He looked years older—harder, colder, more cynical. His eyes had an expression of weary discontent. His new position was still too new for absolute fame or success. Life was not engrossing enough to make up for unhappiness.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hope!”

A sudden light flashed into his eyes. He turned to the door with so swift an impulse that his wife remarked it.

The beautiful woman advancing into the room was unknown to her. The long-cherished invalidism of Lady Crewkerne still lingered about Mrs. Grantley Dering, and made her—to herself—always the most important and interesting factor in her husband's life. Her



long-handled tortoise-shell glass convinced her that the wife of his friend was lovely, was young, was irreproachably gowned. Then her glass fell. She bowed to an introduction that was the prelude to other introductions, and Mrs. Hope became only one of a number of millinery triumphs filing into the artistically designed rooms.

Dinner was announced. She was less interested in that fact than the companion who was to share the ordeal by her side.

Mrs. Leslie Bruce had been merciful and provided her with a member of her adored profession as escort. He was old, bald, suave, sympathetic. They discussed unorthodox complaints in veiled language during ten courses.

Grantley Dering found himself offering an arm to his friend's wife. He was seated by her side breathing an atmosphere of daffodils and

violets, conscious to his finger-tips of an absorbing pleasure in the mere proximity of her gown, the faint perfume of the flowers at her breast.

She looked feverish and excited. Her eyes were more melancholy than of old; her lips smiled less naturally. A spot of crimson glowed on either cheek, and her manner had lost something of its beautiful composure.

She did not address a word to her companion till the buzz of conversation became general. Then his lowered voice and brief sentences seemed to disturb more than interest her. No one took special notice of them. No one observed that, as the elaborate meal went on, her glance became more troubled, while his, deep-set, fiery, compelling, seemed claiming some mastery over her, to which she yielded, half reluctant and half glad.

“So it was not a safe experi-

ment," he said. "It never is. Do you remember when we met at Mrs. Halkett's, and I spoke to you of the unsuitability of it, the irksome, inevitable restraints——"

"To which," she said, "you had already promised yourself?"

He glanced across at the painted cheeks, the bleached fair locks, the hollow eyes and mass of lace and jewels that meant *his* wife, and his mouth grew hard and contemptuous.

"I was at the mercy of circumstances. I had nothing to hope for. Besides, a man is different. Marriage doesn't mean so much to him as it does to a woman!"

Her eyes went to Christopher's face, then suddenly fell. "Sometimes, I think, it means—more," she said.

He had seen the look. He read its meaning only too well. A sharp, jealous pang rent his heart. (How this girl could always

make him suffer? he thought impatiently.)

"Tell me about your work?" he went on abruptly. "It would be a poor compliment to ask you to paint Mrs. Dering's portrait. But she was hinting at it the other day. She had been looking at the one you did of Mrs. Leslie Bruce."

Paula shuddered. "Oh, no," she said. "I could n't. . . . You must n't let her ask me!"

He laughed bitterly. "Don't look so distressed. I never meant that you should desecrate your brush in that fashion. Do you mean to continue painting?"

"Yes. It is an occupation. It lifts one out of one's self—the boredom and littleness and stupidity of life."

"I wonder you do not live at Drumlochrie. Does n't Christopher wish it?"

"He has not said so. We shall probably go there in the summer. Lady Tabitha's death was so sud-

den and awful that neither of us quite liked to settle down at the castle after it."

"How much has happened since we were all there!"

He glanced round the table; then his eyes returned to her face. "It seems like six years to me!" he said softly.

He did not know how her heart echoed those words, what a burden of weary hours, mistakes, regrets pressed upon it as it beat under costly satin, and Venetian point.

She had made a sacrifice, and no one was the better for it.

A sudden accident to Lady Tabitha, a death-bed entreaty to let dying hands bless a wedded pair, and then she had awakened to mingled terror and despair at an enevitable deed. The sense of what she had done, of responsibilities and duties unwittingly undertaken, fell on her like a sudden blow. She braced her energies to meet results, but that bruised,

forlorn feeling never left her. And she knew that this man guessed it all, that he read her—judged her—as no other had power to do.

A day came when in horror she looked back at the fuller meaning of words, and hints, and subtly sweet hours—a day when she told herself, “But for him I might have loved Christopher!”

“How silent you are!” went on the voice beside her—the voice that always had such dangerous power over her. “It is so long since we met, you need not grudge me a word.”

“What can one say—here?” she exclaimed. “You know I never find small talk easy——”

“May I not call on you—sometimes? When I have been to the studio you never are there.”

“I have my own,” she said, and then flushed to her temples. “But I never receive any one in it.”

“Not if one came on business pure and simple?” he asked. “I have been desired to arrange about that portrait I spoke of. There is no need to say you will not do it—to-night.”

She moved restlessly, took up her glass, then set it down untasted. His keen glance noted all.

“I shall not paint her picture,” she said.

“We agreed on that before, but let it serve as an excuse. I am hungry for one half-hour with you—one talk like those of old.”

She shook her head. “That time can never come back. There is no use paltering with truth. . . . It is better for both of us that it never should——”

“That is to say my feelings are nothing to you.”

Their eyes met. There was pain, struggle, hopelessness in both.

“They ought not to be. Yet I cannot bear to hurt any one. Once

it seemed so unimportant, but now——”

She stopped abruptly.

Again her glance rested on her husband. A sharp pang of jealous rage shot through Grantley Dering's heart. At that moment he hated an unconscious rival, and the long struggle for self-mastery ended in flinging the reins to passion and desire. The contrast between the woman who claimed him and the woman whom his friend claimed, flashed in burning colours before his eyes. He who had scoffed at women felt at last the power of—one.

“A gender in satin.” Aye, so she might be, but a gender omnipotent and all-conquering at last. He had defied her power; he had deemed that his influence might be paramount and he remain unscathed. Now, as he saw that glance, as he watched the colour fade and flush in her face, he felt all the evil in him rise to the sur-



face. What had been purposeless drifting as yet, changed into irrevocable purpose.

Her hand, ungloved and sparkling with jewels, lay idly on her lap. For one moment his own covered and clasped it.

"I will call to-morrow," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Remember—you *must* see me."

Ere she could answer his hand was withdrawn. He turned to the lady on his left, and began to talk eagerly, rapidly to her. He addressed no further word to Paula till the signal for leaving the table was given. Then again his eyes claimed hers. "Remember" was their parting message.

. . . . .

"Of course you are happy. One need n't ask. How good Fate has been to you!" rattled Mrs. Leslie, as she dropped into a chair by Paula's side and sipped black cof-

fee. "To think of the dear old Tabitha dying like that—so sad, but so opportune. People so seldom know when to die in this world. It is a matter that wants regulating. How exquisite your gown is! You're not in mourning, I see."

"Christopher hates black, except as a suggestion."

"Oh? and are you going to dress to please him? What a model wife! Is he as devoted as ever? No clubs—or—vices?"

"He goes to a club, I believe. I don't think he ever had any—vices."

"You innocent thing! As if any man could exist without them. Only some are more cautious than others. Wickedness—open or secret—has an acknowledged charm for men—and women too, I fancy. How unutterably dull life would be if some people did n't make mistakes!"

"And how much better."

"Oh, that is a mere matter of opinion. We are only good or bad by comparison, you know. Have you forgiven our dear Grantley for getting married? I have n't. He feeds her on cocoa and oatmeal biscuits, I believe. Is n't she awful? I can't think how he could have summoned up courage to propose to her."

"There was a good deal to be gained by it," said Paula, coldly.

"True; and Grantley never cared for women—as women. He always regarded us from a professional standpoint. I should n't think that left us much charm. It must be like looking at things through a microscope. I remember Leslie insisting once on my looking at a piece of cheese through one. It was quite too unutterably awful! I never from that day touched cheese again. He wanted me to look at bread, and fruit, and other things, but

nothing would induce me to do it. I should have been starved to death if I had gone on with the subject. But you've told me nothing about yourself. I suppose you 'll give up painting now?"

"Why should I?"

"Oh, you're married, and have a house, and duties, and a position to keep up. Surely that makes a difference."

"I have plenty of time for painting. I am too fond of it to give it up for any of the inducements you have named."

"I suppose you will go to Scotland after the season. Do you mean to ask me?"

"Certainly, if you care to come."

"You would n't let me bring Orton Vyse?"

"Certainly not; I dislike his character as much as I do his books."

"I wish you were n't so horribly straight-laced. Is n't there the tiniest *soupeçon* of an inclination

to naughtiness in you at all? Are you always going to pose on a pedestal? It must be awfully fatiguing."

"I hope I don't pose, Nettie; and Heaven knows I feel wicked enough sometimes."

"Do you ever tell Christopher that? But of course he would n't believe you. A husband is the last person in the world to take us at our own estimation; and his own is either too good or too bad to suit."

"Did you ever present your own estimation of yourself to Mr. Leslie Bruce?"

She laughed. "Yes; he did n't agree with it."

"Possibly he knew you too well."

"I believe you mean to be nasty, Paula. You have grown more freezy and 'touch-me-not-ish' than ever. I don't think marriage has improved you."

"According to you it never does improve man or woman."

"It's a hateful institution. But of course it has compensation for—some people."

"The sort of compensation offered by Mr. Orton Vyse or Algy Fortescue?"

"They are very charming men in their way."

"I am glad you added *their* way—it is not yet an accepted standard."

"See how I humoured your scruples; I asked neither of them here to-night."

"Did you think it would affect me?"

"No; but it was not unlikely you might affect—them."

Her lip curled.

"You see you are an uncommon type," continued Mrs. Leslie, putting down her cup, "and they adore uncommon types."

"I thought they were your adorers, Nettie?"

"That is another of your nasty speeches. You'll never be really

nice and womanly, Paula, till you care for somebody for whom you ought n't to care, and learn what women have to bear and—conceal.”

A strange hard look came over Paula's face. Her eyes fell.

“ My dear Nettie, don't pretend that modern women or modern life—as you know it—ever descend to anything so commonplace as emotion. They have killed out the possibility of feeling long before there is anything to feel. Look at yourself.”

“ Oh, leave me out of the question. I only flirt. Look at yourself now. If you——”

Paula closed her fan with a sudden snap.

“ And leave *me* out of the question, for I never shall flirt.”

“ No,” said Mrs. Leslie, and her eyes shot a swift, strange glance at the proud, composed face. “ You will do much worse. Love, and kill yourself fighting against it.”

“ Nettie ! ”

“ Oh, don't be indignant. You know as well as I do that you don't care for Christopher. But marriage is a dangerous eye-opener. You may one day find that you *have* learnt to care for—some one else.”

Paula rose from her seat, pale, hurt, indignant. The door opened and her eyes met Grantley Dering's calm, impassive glance.

Then she—remembered.



## CHAPTER X.

C HRISTOPHER HOPE stood before his easel contemplating a newly finished picture. It had been hanging about a long time. In a sudden fit of desperation and hard work he had plunged at it again, and given himself no rest until he had finished it.

"I wonder if she will like it," he thought.

She—meant of course the woman who was still first in his thoughts—his life, his heart. Marriage had in no way dethroned her; she was still "half a wonder, half a dream" to him, set upon a throne so lofty that no other woman seemed in even approachable distance.

He laid down his brushes now with a sigh of content. To himself he was only a foolish, tender-hearted mortal, but in art he knew he had reached higher ground than ever she could touch. That he had power, strength, facility, before which her talents paled into mere womanly cleverness. It seemed to him that if ever she would care for him at all it would be for and because of this one supremacy. She would be so proud of him, proud of the name she shared, and the honours he could lay at her feet.

The soft chiming of a clock woke him from his dreams. It occurred to him that this was the hour they were usually together. The servant came in with tea and lights, and he drew up his chair to the little table and sat there waiting. Five—ten minutes passed. He wondered she did not come.

"Perhaps she is out," he thought, and poured out the overdrawn

liquid from its quaint Queen Anne pot and sipped it from mere force of habit.

He did not enjoy it, and he missed her presence. He pushed aside the cup at last and took another survey of the picture, arranging the lights so that they should fall upon it to the best advantage.

"I'll go and look for her," he thought. "Perhaps she is in the drawing-room."

She was not there, and the pretty, artistic room seemed strangely lonely and empty.

With a sudden inspiration he turned in the direction of her own studio. It was a small room entered by a conservatory, and of late she had occupied it a great portion of the day.

He crossed the tiled floor, his old felt slippers, to which he clung as fondly as to his old working coat, making no sound.

The door was ajar and screened

by a heavy *portière* of tapestry. Just as his hand went out to push aside its thick folds he heard a sound that seemed to paralyse his effort.

It was the sound of a sob, a deep, heart-broken sob, and following it came the low, earnest tones of a man's voice.

Christopher's heart seemed to contract with a sudden spasm of pain—pain so sharp, so keen, that for a moment he lost consciousness of all else.

The voice was Grantley Dering's voice. He was speaking to Paula as a man speaks to the woman he loves—as no man of honour had any right to speak to his friend's wife.

The curtain dropped from a nerveless grasp. Cold and faint and shaking, Christopher crept across the intervening rooms and back to his own studio. The shock and horror of the revelation was too sudden, too unexpected to be combated at once.

His friend and his wife. His *friend*, the one man he had trusted so utterly; his *wife*, the woman who had been his ideal of purity and virtue.

A nameless horror gripped him. Was he mad?—dreaming? Had he really heard that sob? those madly passionate words? With a smothered groan he buried his face in his hands, distrustful almost of his own senses in this terrible hour. His wife—*his*. The dearest possession of life, the one adored and treasured thing it held for him—false—false—worse than dead.

He reviewed these past six months. He had known she did not love him with anything approaching his love for her, but she had been so sweet, so gracious. Above all there had always seemed in her so noble a divinity of womanhood that he could not contemplate a fall so awful.

That she did not love him was, to his humility, in no way sur-

prising, but that she should love Grantley Dering, the cold, cynical man of the world, to whom all women were but a "gender," who had never yet shown softness or tenderness for any one of the sex, that did indeed seem incredible in those first confused, awful moments.

Gradually, from the chaos of emotion, arose some clearer, wider sense of what all this might mean.

He must save her at any cost, at any sacrifice. She could not know the path of danger which opened before her; she could not realise, she so cold, so proud, so pure of mind, to what fatal depths an unlawful passion can drag a woman. He must tell her, he must open her eyes. Had he not promised to be her friend as well as her lover; her friend in hour of need, her lover—— Ah, that was over now; dead and done with——for evermore.

God knows what agony of soul

men suffer in such an hour as this . . . God—who in bestowing the gift of manhood on His own Son gave him at least no part in the passion and the woe of man's love for woman.

. . . . .

"Dinner is served, sir. My mistress desired me to say—"

Christopher sprang to his feet. Dinner! The hideous conventionality of modern life seemed to close in upon his hour of agony and mock that terrible tearless grief.

"To say," continued the man, "that she is not feeling well. She cannot come down this evening."

"Take it away—I don't want any—I'm busy," exclaimed Christopher incoherently. The man looked surprised, but discreetly withdrew.

When neither master nor mistress of an establishment can partake of its most important meal,

there must be something in the shape of a loose screw about. The servants' hall had a good time of it that evening while their master was roaming the streets in speechless misery, and their mistress lay in her pretty room, fevered, shamed, despairing, unable to think clearly or rationally of anything save her one new sense of life's great loss and gain.

Suddenly, swiftly, she had come face to face with both. Stray words, subtle hints, glimpses through soul chinks of another nature, *this* is what they had meant. Love that was sin, misery that seemed to wrap body and soul in flames of anguish.

Face to face at last with the contradictions of a woman's complex qualities, she saw herself in the mirror of her own remorse. Saw that her weakness had compelled another life to suffer with her own; for to wrong her husband in thought meant to her



the greatest wrong she was capable of inflicting.

It had seemed so easy to be kind, gentle, companionable. He had been so devoted and so good. Life had swung so easily and pleasantly on its even balance of good comradeship, and in one moment—one cruel, terrible moment—the whole thing had been utterly changed.

She shuddered and shut out light from her burning eyes. They ached with tears that would not fall. What was the use of tears? They would n't alter anything, they would n't free her from this burden, they would n't give back to two lives the freedom they had so heedlessly bartered.

A moment of weakness had forged for her the fetters of a lifetime.

How well she recalled that day when Christopher had told her of his love, had prayed so earnestly for hers.

"Thank God," she cried, "I never promised *that*! At least so far I have not been false to him."

The hours passed. She lay in passive misery unheeding time. At last she roused herself to wonder dimly what had become of Christopher. It was unusual for him to be so long without claiming her.

She rose from the couch on which she had thrown herself and looked at the clock. Eleven. How strange that the evening and the night had crept on to this late hour and left her free and undisturbed!

What should she do? The thought of bed was hateful. She felt sleep would be impossible. Again she dimly wondered where Christopher could be. It was so utterly unlike him to leave her so long without notice of any sort.

The glass opposite showed her her face. How white it was—how unutterably sad her eyes looked

through that dusky cloud of loose disordered hair! With shaking hands she twisted it up, and then changed her gown for a loose white wrapper. "I must see him," she said to herself. "I can't sleep, rest, live with this hateful thing between us. After all he promised he would be my *friend* whatever happened. It is a friend I need. A friend, not a judge: sympathy, not blame. If his love is as great as he has sworn——"

She broke off abruptly. "Oh, what fools we women are! Desiring the impossible, overlooking the best, afraid of speaking the truth . . . afraid of love even while our hearts are craving it. Can't I be different? Can't I *dare* to be honest? Just that—no more, no less. What do most women do when they learn what I have learnt to-day?—learn that they are unlawfully loved? . . . Shriek, weep, hide the fearful secret, suffer, struggle. . . . yield."

A crimson flush crept over her white face.

She covered it suddenly with her hands, ashamed of her own shame. "God help me . . . God forgive me," she moaned. "It was not for this I married. It was not for this I took all his great love and trust. . . . His trust"—her hands fell. "If I could anchor myself on *that*," she whispered huskily. "Oh, the relief, the *safety* . . . but he is only a man, and love is selfish. If I tell him what is in my heart he will mistrust and misjudge me. It would want a great nature to lift itself up after such a confession, and say, 'Neither do I condemn thee.'"

Was Christopher's nature great? Was he only just like any other man? selfish with love's most insensate and insatiable desires? Seeing in the first whisper of coldness only disloyalty, in the pain of struggling denial, only guilt.

He had said, "I will be your

faithful friend, no matter what happens."

How well she remembered those words. Had the time come to test them at last? For it was a friend she needed in this crisis of her life. A friend able to judge and compassionate and decide for her.

"I will risk it," she cried suddenly. "At least I shall have the poor satisfaction of honesty. In the shipwreck around me it will be one spar to cling to."

She gave no further look at the face on which pain had left so sad a print, at the eyes with their bistre shadows, at the ruffled, disordered hair.

Just as she was, with the sudden inspired strength of strong resolve, she went softly, steadily down the stairs to seek her husband's presence and tell him she loved—another man.

## CHAPTER XI.

THERE was no answer to the hesitating knock at the studio door. Softly she tried the handle. It yielded, and she entered.

A flood of moonlight poured in through the great uncurtained window. Near it stood the easel with the completed picture she had not yet seen. A lamp burned dimly on the wide mantel-shelf.

In a chair by the window, the light straying over his bent head, sat Christopher. He had not heard her entrance. His dazed brain was quite unconscious of trivialities. All his senses were deadened. He seemed to have reached the end of life with the end of his faith in man, his trust in woman.

Suddenly a light touch fell on his arm. He lifted his head and met the great sad, questioning eyes of his wife.

Something in that gaze—its unutterable grief, its unutterable yearning—touched the very centre nerves of his own pain. His sympathy with her and for her made him self-forgetful.

“What is it, Paula?” he said gently. “You . . . want to speak to me?”

“I want,” she said, “to put you to the strongest test a woman can put a man who loves her. I want . . . I want to speak to you, Christopher, as to the friend you promised to be to me. I shall hurt you, grieve you, but oh! be patient.”

She sank down beside him and rested her head on his knees. “Oh!” she went on brokenly, “if men only knew what women *want* in such an hour as this. . . . It is so little—so much. . . . Christopher, if I was your sister . . . if

I was a friend, a foolish, hot-headed boy, who knew only your goodness and your strength, and I came to you and told you a pitiful tale of weakness, would you blame or pity me?"

"God knows," he said huskily. "A man's strength is sometimes a broken reed in the hour of trial."

"But not yours . . . not yours. You are different, Christopher. I want your patience for—for a little while. I am so tired—it has gone on for so long, and I can't *bear* it any longer. I'm going to put you to the test you bade me when . . . when you first asked me to be your wife. Forget you are my husband for one little half-hour—be only the friend you promised."

He lifted his head again and looked at her in dumb misery. Yet one little glint of joy broke through its clouds as he saw how clear and true her eyes still were. At least she had not sinned inten-



tionally, as so many women sinned. At least she was not going to deceive him, as so many wives deceived their husbands.

With a great effort he calmed his own emotion, and then held out his hand to her.

"I remember," he said, "all I promised. Do not fear to put me to the test, Paula. I am only a friend to-night."

She took the outstretched hand and held it closely in her own, glancing a moment with mournful questioning at his white face. Then she spoke.

"Our marriage," she said, "was hastened on, as you know, by your aunt's desire. If . . . if I had waited, if I had listened to the warnings of my own heart I would not have married you, Christopher."

The hand she held seemed to grow colder; otherwise there was no sign of the cruel pain those words gave the patient listener.

"Because," . . . she went on fal-

teringly, "I had already begun to care for . . . another man. I did not know . . . I could not imagine what strange attraction he had for me. He was not—not good like you. He made me feel wicked, restless, wretched, unhappy . . . but he made me feel I was a *woman* . . . somehow you never did that. He gave me new senses, as it were: freedom, knowledge, fear of vague danger, of those unknown, delicious, terrifying emotions that have so strange a fascination for every woman. But he never said he loved me, Christopher. I never knew whether he cared or not . . . and he went away and married another woman, and I——"

He pressed her hand convulsively. You need not say—that," he said hoarsely.

"It was wrong of me. Oh! I see it now; I know it now. What I do affects you. I can't suffer alone, or sin alone——"

A cry of anguish escaped him.

"My God! Paula, not that. . . . Don't tell me *that*."

"I think," she went on steadily, "that men and women look at things so differently. I feel that disloyalty of heart is as terrible a sin as disloyalty of action, and that is my sin to you, Christopher. Only this I will not do; I will not live a double life; I will not *seem* your wife and let another man's love be for ever breathing its poisoned sweetness between our hearts. As yet, Christopher, I only know he loves me—unwisely, wickedly, you will say—and I came to you to tell you this, to say, 'Help me against my own weakness . . . be my friend—forget you are my husband, and save me from—him—and—from, myself!'"

She dropped his hand and sank at his feet, her face hidden from sight, great panting sobs shaking her frame.

Christopher's whole soul was wrung with agony, words he had

none. He could only gaze dumbly at the creature he had loved so passionately — adored above all other women. Her abasement and her suffering seemed to him but the fault of his own selfish love. If he had waited, if he had not hurried on that fatal marriage, she would have been free now. As it was three lives were to suffer, three hearts to ache.

The sense of his own wretchedness lost its reality as he gazed on the spectacle of hers. If by any act, by any sacrifice, he could have given her back her freedom, he would not have counted the cost for an instant.

But he knew that was impossible. Melodramatic deeds were, as yet, an undreamt of drama to Christopher Hope.

Under the stress of self-revelation Paula had lost her usual restraint and self-possession. Life had suddenly become a tragedy, a thing to fear, and dread, and trem-

ble at. It was not a thing of dreams and irresponsibilities. It could seize one like a maelström, and whirl one into depths and fierce currents, danger, and death.

She shuddered. All things good and pure, to which she had clung so long, seemed but visionary fancies. Here was reality; here was solid ground. Sin, in its vast possibilities, loomed before her. How harshly she had judged other women — once. She who had deemed herself above the common weakness of their common womanhood.

When she heard her husband's voice speaking at last, it seemed to her to sound from some far distance, so cold and strained and yet so steady it was.

"You have set me a hard task, Paula," he said. "There is only one thing that makes it easier—your unasked trust in me. For I knew this—I knew who was with

you to-day, and I had no hope but that you meant to deceive me in fact, as you had so long done without intention."

"*You knew?*"

She raised a white, shamed face, and then hid it once more with shuddering hands.

"I was going to your studio to seek you. I overheard your sobs and—his consolation."

"You heard enough," she said, "to despise us both."

"I despise him," he answered sternly. "For you I have only pity. If he loved you he should have told you so when you were free to listen and he to plead, or else have held his peace for ever."

"*That*," she said, "would have held him less a man and more a hero. But love makes all men weak, Christopher."

"God knows it does," he groaned, remembering himself. What capacity for heroic feeling

had he shown when he wooed this girl in the old morning-room at Drumlochrie? Suddenly he stooped and raised her from her crouching posture.

"It hurts me to see you like that," he said, "and I am not your judge. I am only your faithful friend who loves and longs to serve you. Let us consider what is best to be done."

He placed her in his own chair and began to pace the floor with firm, unfaltering steps. As he passed the painting he half paused, glanced at it, then turned the easel aside.

Her face looked out at him from the work of which he had been so proud a few hours before. She leant back in the great wide chair with a little tired sigh. The worst was over. She had told him all.

She watched him with a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

The untidy figure in its old working coat, the ruffled red hair

at which she had once mocked, the dear, kind, honest face, now white and drawn with pain.

How good he had always been—how thoughtful and tender and devoted !

Why was it that a woman valued all these things so lightly? Why was it that some hateful, untamable, primitive instinct in her rushed forth to meet what was only—unworthy? The passion that is brutal, the attraction that is apart from either goodness or nobility, the mere physical qualities of beauty and strength? Why?—

She asked it despairingly as other women have asked it since the Book of Life first opened for them with Love and Temptation as its two first lessons.



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## CHAPTER XII.

**I**N those long, torturing hours Christopher Hope had faced Truth, and gained self-mastery. What he suffered was of less importance to him than what was best to do for her.

The moments passed, and she still waited.

His rage against Dering, his pity for her alike warred with his own instincts of justice, and his consciousness that she was not to blame for this catastrophe.

At last he approached her. "Paula," he said, "I think no other woman would have done what you have done to-night, but then I have always felt that you are not like other women."

“Just as weak,” she said. . . .

“Just as foolish.”

He stopped her with a gesture of denial. .

“As you have trusted me,” he went on, “so I must trust you. You have claimed my promise, I am ready to fulfil its claims. Our marriage cannot be undone—that is unfortunate—but I will not enforce any of its rights upon you. Your life henceforth must be at your own disposal, I—am only its protector. For you are too young and too beautiful a woman, Paula, to be left without one. I am rich; the world is before you, make your home where you will. Perhaps in time you will forget this—this man who has come between us, perhaps even a day may come when you will be—free. But if you were my sister—if you were even the friend of whom you spoke, and you had come to me with this confession, I could only try to save you from yourself, and

from consequences you are too innocent to foresee. Paula, sooner or later a guilty love means guilt. Life has proved that again and again. Men and women have vowed they *will* not fall, they will be true to their higher nature, but they *have* fallen, and their higher nature has proved a poor protection against the lower. God knows why it is, perhaps—He made us . . . .”

He turned aside suddenly. It was so hard to master feeling, to keep down the surging misery and the over-whelming love that were fighting like mad beasts under that calm exterior.

“I am going to save you,” he said huskily, “from this, if I can. Your confidence in me makes me hopeful of—possibilities. But for to-night, rest, sleep in peace. You have borne enough. To-morrow I will tell you what I have decided.”

She rose. A moment she stood

there, looking at him in wonder and in awe. Beneath the homely face, beneath the rugged features, through the sadness and the grief of those wet blue eyes she caught at last a glimpse of a true man's truth, a weak man's strength, a loving man's self-sacrifice.

Her head drooped, her voice faltered.

"God bless you, dear," she said. "You are a thousand times too good for me."

Then, with a swift unaccountable impulse, she lifted his hand to her lips in the first caress she had ever voluntarily given him.

. . . . .

He heard the door close, he heard the soft rustle of her gown grow far and faint. Then his eyes fell on the hand her lips had touched. A tear had fallen beside the kiss.

As he gazed at it the great wave of his own misery swept back, and

beat and broke at the barriers he had erected.

A sob broke with cruel force on the stillness of the room. He fell beside the chair on which she had been seated, praying dumbly for help in this most bitter hour. He knew he must gather strength to face the blankness of the future; all hope of love and peace was blighted. Henceforth he would have but the mockery of a home—the mockery of a wife.

As he knelt he lifted his white face to heaven, and for the first time cursed the traitor who had brought this misery upon him.

With the fierceness of that new hatred there suddenly leapt to life a longing for vengeance. He sprang to his feet, his veins on fire, his heart one flaming hell of revengeful feeling. Dering owed his success, his wealth to the fond infatuation of a woman—a weak woman, a vain woman, an exacting and tyrannical woman. If she

knew of his perfidy, if her jealousy were aroused and the man she had served so well were shown up to her in his true colours—What better vengeance could be taken by the man he had wronged?

“He has not spared me, why should I spare him?” he cried, as the tide of anger tossed him to and fro. “An eye for an eye, a wrong for a wrong. . . . It is but just. It is God’s law of old.”

Yet even as he said it his strength relaxed. The fire died out of pulse and vein.

“It would not undo this,” he thought despairingly. “It would not give her back to me, or take one feather’s weight of pain from either heart, and revenge is an ignoble thing at best.”

To and fro he paced the studio for long and weary hours. He saw the lamp flicker into darkness, the moonlight die out of the cloudy heavens, the grey dawn break in a cheerless sky.

His brain ached with the weight and misery of endless thought. The mockery of life, the mockery of love faced him and demanded just and impartial dealing. He must put aside all personal feeling for a time, and act for this dear woman who had trusted him as if she were but a sister whose fair fame he cherished. He must consecrate to her need the friendship he had once promised.

The future held no hope. Even love had lost its charm in this dark hour. But a pity almost divine crept into his heart, and nerved his failing strength to meet her demands.

The first step to be taken was to remove her out of reach of Dering. He wondered would she go for a time to Drumlochrie. She had liked the place so well, once. Would she stay there while he made necessary preparations for giving up this town house and going abroad?

His picture—well, fortunately that was finished. The details for varnishing he must trust to a friend should it be accepted for the next Academy, of which he had little doubt.

He drew it forth once more in the new faint light of the spring day and gazed at it long and earnestly. A sense of its merit, the satisfaction of the artist rose to combat the sorrows of the man.

"It is well done, but some day you will do better," whispered Hope. "Live for me and I will never prove unfaithful," murmured Art. "No mistress so true or so divine. Give me your heart and let all else go by."

"I could have done it once," he thought, "I cannot do it now."

He turned the painting to the wall and then left the studio, worn out body and soul after that terrible vigil.

It had left its mark on his face and on his life for ever.



### CHAPTER XIII.

“MR. HOPE, what is this I hear? You are leaving town—going abroad . . . giving up this lovely house after the trouble you took in furnishing and arranging it?”

“It is quite true, Mrs. Bruce. I am doing all these things you say.”

“But it’s so extraordinary.”

“I thought *you* advocated extraordinary proceedings.”

“Oh, well—in a way, of course, but there are limits. Paula won’t write. I have n’t heard a word from her except that she was going to Scotland.”

“That, surely, is not extraordinary. She wanted a bit of Scotch

scenery to complete her picture, and has gone to paint it comfortably in her own house."

"It was so sudden."

"Artists are not to be judged by the same rule as ordinary mortals. They can even afford to be—sudden."

"Well, you are two horrid people, and it looks very odd. I tell you that candidly."

"It is most kind of you. So few people are candid—nowadays!"

"Of course," with a bewitching little pout, "you won't tell me the truth, but I believe you and Paula have had a tiff. She was always a little—hard—to get on with. I know that."

"I," answered Christopher unmovedly, "have been more fortunate. I have not found her hard to get on with."

"Oh, you would n't confess it if you had!"

Mrs. Leslie Bruce gave a sharp

glance round the dismantled drawing-room. She had stormed the citadel with a purpose, but she felt there was little promise of success in Christopher's aspect.

"People like you and Paula need n't be so particular about what you do for—art," she resumed. "It is n't as if you worked for a living—now."

"No," said Christopher with a little tired smile. "Then we would both be in Scotland."

Her keen eyes flashed a question she dared not put.

"I believe you are jealous of Paula," she said, "and so are going to shut her up in Drumlochrie, like one of those wicked ogres in the fairy tales."

"On the contrary, we are going abroad as soon as I have arranged about sub-letting this house."

"Going abroad! At this time of the year?"

"Is it so very surprising? Paula has always had a desire to see

foreign countries. I am happy in being able to gratify it. Our work is done. We are going to enjoy a holiday in our own fashion."

Mrs. Leslie looked at him, a little smile of malice on her red lips.

"Perhaps you are wise," she said. "London life has its dangers, even for one so devoted to—art—as Paula."

He gave no sign that the shot had gone home.

"London life," he said coolly, "is the best example of wasted energy on pretended enjoyment that the age can produce. To the rich it is a masked vice, to the poor a prison, to the workers a hell, where demons mock at all good and gracious gifts that fain would lift men higher than their own worthlessness!"

"You are talking almost as horribly as Grantley Dering," she said with a shudder. "By the way, have you seen him this last week?"

I have n't. He did n't even drop in on my day, and of late he has done so most regularly. So has Paula."

Christopher winced. To hear those two names coupled together so lightly stabbed him anew with pain.

Mrs. Leslie saw the sudden pallor of his face. A gleam of satisfaction came into her eyes. She had never quite forgiven his desertion of her at Drumlochrie.

"I have n't seen him this last week either," he said coldly.

"Ah, marriage makes a difference to friendship," said Mrs. Leslie. "Especially men's friendship. Modern wives either like their husband's friends too little or—too much. But you and Dr. Dering have married very different types of women. I should n't fancy the late Lady Crewkerne would like you—too much. Her intellectual faculties are not overpowering—are they?"

Every little word went home. He felt he hated this woman. He wondered how Paula could ever have called her—friend.

"I know nothing of Mrs. Dering's intellectual powers," he said abruptly. "Perhaps they are reserved for her husband's entertainment, instead of being squandered on every empty-headed fool who comes by!"

She raised her pretty eyebrows with affected surprise.

"How crossly you said that! I thought you were never cross. Paula always said you had the most perfect temper. If I remember, your views of life were not the cynic's views at Drumlochrie."

"Perhaps not," he said bitterly. "I was a mere blundering idiot in those days. I had not met—you."

"*Me?*" She started. A queer little smile touched her mouth, then vanished. "You flatter me, Mr. Hope. I never took you in hand as a pupil."

Christopher Hope reflected in the pause that followed that there were two ways of looking at everything. He had not intended to convey that he had ever been in a state of tutelage to Mrs. Leslie Bruce.

Presently she glanced at the clock. "I ought to be going," she said.

He rose with unpardonable alacrity. He had been praying for the announcement. He thought how very long a quarter of an hour can be—sometimes.

"I suppose," she murmured, with one of her pretty glances, "that it will be ages before we meet again, Mr. Hope."

He devoutly hoped so, but he only observed that the foreign tour had not been so accurately mapped out as to permit of fixing a date for that blissful event.

"You will tell Paula to write to me," she continued. "It's too bad

of her to lose the season. I really can't forgive you for letting her run away like this."

Her furs slipped off. He handed them back to her. It never seemed to occur to him to place them about those graceful shoulders.

She thought he was the strangest man——

"Let me see you to your carriage," he said mechanically, and they passed out into the hall.

He opened the door and went with her down the steps to the miniature brougham. The cold March wind swept up the street—the lamps were just being lighted. A man walking rapidly towards them, paused—hesitated . . . then advanced. The carriage lamps flashed on his face as it dashed away. Christopher saw it was Grantley Dering.

For a moment their eyes met in a passionate challenge—then Dering came slowly forward.



"I—I was just going to look you up," he said.

Over Christopher's white face came a sudden flush of colour. He took no notice of the outstretched hand, only walked up the steps, leaving Dering to follow.

The first room on the left of the hall was the library. Into this Christopher walked. A lamp stood on the table. Before the great bookcase were some half-filled packing cases.

Grantley Dering's eyes noted all these things as his friend crossed the room and stood by the great fireplace, where a dull fire burnt in the grate.

"Are you going away?" he asked in a voice that vainly strove to be natural.

"Did you only come here to ask that?" said Christopher.

The change in his looks, his voice, his manner, startled Dering.

"He knows—something," he thought. "Has she betrayed her-

self? My God! what fools women are."

"No—I came to see you," he answered, laying his hat down on the table, and tossing his gloves into it.

Christopher's blue eyes grew dark with anger. "That's a lie," he said. "You came to see—my wife."

"You are not over-courteous," said Dering, a hot flush rising to his brow. "May I ask what has ruffled your usual equanimity?"

There was a long pause—yet by seconds only could it have been counted—while passion, held in leash, strained at restraining force, and the two men, who had been friends from school days upwards, faced each other with the knowledge of treachery between them.

"Dering," said Christopher Hope, "why have you done this thing? . . . No, don't palter; don't affect to misunderstand. Answer me, as man to man, and

for once forget your damned cynicism. Were there not women enough in the world to play the fool with, that you must tamper with the purest, noblest creature that God ever created."

The fierce words fell on Dering's ears like fire. They pierced his armour of callous self-control. They forced him into self-judgment before the man he had despised as a dreamer and a fool even while calling him "friend."

He drew himself up and faced Christopher.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"Everything. She has told me all. She has trusted me to save her in her hour of peril as only a good woman could trust. And, by the heaven above, Dering, I mean to do it! . . ."

"You are leaving me somewhat in the dark," said Dering. "I don't see that there is any peril in my friendship for your wife."

“ *Friendship !* ” Christopher’s eyes flashed with sudden fury. “ Don’t miscall that name . . . You misjudge us both. You forget we do not belong to your world. Its falsehoods and hypocrisies are loathsome, not enticing. Dering, if you had loved her, wooed her honestly, as a man should, when you were free, I would have stood aside and foregone all claim. But you had n’t the courage to face life and fight its battles for *her*. You preferred to sell yourself body and soul for a woman’s wealth. You made your bargain ; stick to it. But at least you shall not bring your poisoned tempting and your false morality into the atmosphere that my wife breathes.”

Dering looked at the white face, transformed by manly strength and manly indignation. His own baseness and his own sins flashed suddenly before him in the ugly colours of truth.

“Have you—any more to say?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Christopher, “I have. It is the last time I shall speak to you—the last time I shall willingly look upon your face. You have lived a false life, Dering; you have plumed yourself on a knowledge of the world and of women. But men like you don’t understand women; they don’t *wish* to understand them. A woman like Paula is to you a sealed book. You regarded her through your own distorted fancies; you tried to poison her pure mind and to teach her the hateful, sensuous, impure passion that suits the jaded tastes of women of the world. No, don’t speak. You will say she loved you. . . I don’t deny it. She told me that also. But a woman would not tell her husband she loved another man if she meant to yield to that love in the base and selfish way that *you* hoped, Dering.

Paula has claimed my protection. That protection shall shield her from you while a drop of blood lives in my veins. She is my wife, she shall remain my wife. Now go!—our friendship is ended for ever. . . .”

Their eyes met once more. A half-contemptuous smile curled Dering's lips.

“In our school days,” he said, “we fought one pitched battle, I thrashed you; to-day, when we are of riper years, we have fought another, and you are victor—we are quits.”

He took up his gloves and drew them slowly on. Then he moved towards the door.

Christopher remained by the fireplace watching him.

At the door he turned. A red flush burned on either cheek. His mouth still wore that faint contemptuous smile.

“You know what I have always thought of women,” he said. “Are

you still sure that your wife is so unlike the rest of her sex? How do you know I — loved — her? How do you know I did not act like this on your behalf? just to prove to you that she was only like—other women!”

It was the last straw.

Ere he could turn the handle of the door, Christopher had sprung across the room. His hand was at his throat. He shook him till there seemed no breath in the slight frame—no life in the livid face.

“It is men like you,” he cried, “who make the world so vile. If it were not for—for her sake, your life should pay for that insult.”

He released him suddenly—so suddenly that the door was flung open, shut and locked in his face, ere Grantley Dering had recovered his scattered senses.

He did not recover his usual cynical composure till he was once more facing the cold March air.

Then he reflected that scenes were damned bad form, and that it was a good thing the woman had taken herself off. A woman who could tell her husband of another man's passion for her, and sever the friendship of a half lifetime was certainly a woman to be avoided. He was well out of it. There was no use in fighting Christopher. Duelling was out of fashion, and, above all, it would never do for this to get to his wife's ears.

"It is all very like a French comedy," he thought, "treated by an English expert. For no French woman would ever have been such a fool as Paula Drewe. Thank Heaven I did not marry her. Life would have been a succession of scenes."

. . . . .  
Alone once more, Christopher Hope tried to calm his stung and outraged feelings to their normal condition. Never in his life had



such anger mastered him as in that one murderous moment. Insult to himself he could have borne, but insult to her—the woman he had placed on so exalted a pinnacle of purity—that well-nigh maddened him.

He looked round the dismantled room ; he listened to the dreary stillness of the house. All the life and beauty and warmth of home had gone. Would they ever come back to him again ?

Mechanically he walked towards the half-emptied shelves, and stood before the scattered volumes.

The anger died softly out of pulse and heart. It was not in him to nourish wrath for long ; but the grief and bitterness remained. He wondered dimly if they would always remain ; if a day would ever come when she would recognise how unworthy was the love for which she now suffered, how true the heart that for life, for

death, for all eternity had given itself to her.

The book with which his fingers trifled, opened suddenly before his eyes. Only half conscious still of external things he gazed on the open page. It was a volume of poems by the sweetest singer of modern times.

The verse before him was scored by pencil marks. As he saw them the old sick pain gnawed at his heart once more. It was a trick of Paula's when reading, to mark in this fashion any passages she liked or admired. He stooped and read the words—

"Wait . . . my faith is large in Time,  
And that which shapes it to some perfect  
end."

His hand relaxed. The book fell to the ground and there lay unheeded.

"I will—wait," he said.

THE END.





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